nonsupervisory, hourly wage earner) would need to work in order to afford various consumer goods. A square foot of new house cost 6.5 hours of work time in the 1950s; now it's 5.5 hours. Home air conditioning systems once cost about 40 hours of work per 1,000 BTUs; now it's four hours. The McDonald brothers' original cheeseburger of the 1950s cost a half-hour's wages; now it's three minutes'. A gallon of milk now costs less than half as many work-minutes as it did in the 1950s. And so on. Calculations such as these demonstrate that, judged by buying power, the American economy is serving most citizens well.

Cox and Alm also provide the historical perspective that's often missing from laments about the contemporary economy. Almost half of the economy was agrarian a century ago, and the service sector overtook manufacturing in size not in the 1990s but in the 1930s—facts frequently overlooked by those who think an economy based on a relatively small heavy-industrial sector is unprecedented and spooky. *Myths of Rich and Poor* also contains some hysterical past predictions of economic doom, such as Martin van Buren's 1829 warning that the construction of railroads would end prosperity by undermining the canal system—and, at any rate, "the Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speeds."

Where *Myths of Rich and Poor* falters is by equating a high living standard with a happy citizenry. As the University of Michigan researcher Ronald Inglehart has shown, there is surprisingly little correlation between affluence and happiness. Most Americans are better off in material terms than they were even a short time ago, and that's good. But affluence is only one aspect of what really makes human beings rich or poor. Love, community, morality, and spirituality can mean just as much.

—*Gregg Easterbrook*

THE POLAR BEAR STRATEGY: Reflections on Risk in Modern Life.

By John F. Ross. Perseus. 208 pp. $25

THE CULTURE OF FEAR: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things.

By Barry Glassner. Basic. 276 pp. $25

Six men hiking across the Arctic tundra, with one rifle among them, come upon the tracks of a large carnivore. They argue at some length about what to do. Unable to agree, they do nothing, just muddle onward.

This is the engaging lead to *The Polar Bear Strategy*. Ross is a senior editor of *Smithsonian*, and the book grew out of an article he wrote for the magazine in 1995. The book reflects its origins: it is compact, lucid, insightful, scientifically sound but eminently readable, and written for the layperson.

The author shows that the sources of peril, small and large, are ubiquitous: diet, cigarettes, dioxin, pesticides, road rage, air travel, nuclear power, amniocentesis, even five-gallon buckets (in which about 50 children drown every year). Until quite recently, individuals and society relied largely on the "polar bear strategy"—all worry and argument, but no planning.

Now, though, we often see what Ross terms the "Orwellian side of risk management"—the proliferation of buzzers, fences, and speed bumps; the warning printed on the child's Batman costume ("FOR PLAY ONLY: Mask and chest plate are not protective: Cape does not enable user to fly"). Scientists and regulators have grown so adept at finding risks that risk management now intrudes into every corner of our lives. The intrusions encourage us to cede responsibility, to be passive, to view ourselves as victims.

Swayed by the mass media and advocacy groups, meanwhile, most of us worry too much about insignificant risks while all but ignoring truly substantial threats. The most serious of our biomolecular enemies, Ross notes, originate in our geophysical and biological surroundings: in smoking, bad diet, and our own genetic heritages. We now understand the consequences of smoking and diet. Soon we will possess detailed information about our individual genetic frailties, giving us still greater power to choose and control—a development we can welcome and a responsibility we should embrace.

Glassner's *Culture of Fear* focuses on how public perceptions of risk are shaped. The Batman cape warning appears here too, as do asbestos, breast implants, and airplane crashes. But Glassner is mainly interested in our social aversions. A professor of sociology at the University of Southern California, he contends that mass media, inept experts, and other fear-mongers profit economically or politically from manipulating our aversions. Conservative

foundations orchestrate public loathing of "political correctness" on campus (it's really just "civility"). Violent inner-city males and TV violence aren't the problem; the gun industry is. Overblown concerns about on-line smut, missing children, teen moms, and illegitimacy all divert us, Glassner says, from "facing up to our collective lack of responsibility toward our nation's children."

So what should we fear? Glassner has his list, a distinctly political one: "hunger, dilapidated schools, gun proliferation, and deficient health care for much of the U.S. population." To resolve these real problems, we must "finance and organize." Where Ross prescribes better-informed individual choices, Glassner seeks a solution in collective action.

—*Peter Huber*

HOME TOWN.
By Tracy Kidder. Random House. 338 pp. $25.95

American culture of the late 20th century holds that everything significant happens in the big city. It is acknowledged, perhaps, that strong character and noble suffering exist in the rural heart of this great country, but the national secular religion maintains that our political, artistic, and civic genius resides in the great metropolises of New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago; secondarily in the old and new worlds of Boston, San Francisco, and perhaps Miami; and, somewhat grudgingly, in the decadent bureaucratic pits of Washington. Left out of the calculus are the smaller cities and towns where the society carries out its essential business and endures its angst in microcosm—left out, that is, until a schoolchild slaughters his classmates and teachers, or a tornado wipes out a community.

Now along comes master chronicler Kidder, who focuses his considerable talents on Northampton, Massachusetts. Like every other distinct community across America that has its own soul, Northampton is hardly immune to outside influences and internal dysfunction. Far from it. But its people know who they are and what they want from life; their pride in their community and their fundamental faith in the future gets them through all manner of adversity and confusion. "If you do all your growing up in the same small place," writes Kidder, "you don't shed identities. You accumulate them." During his several years of intense reporting in the town, he particularly followed the life and times of one Tommy O'Connor, the youngest member of a large working-class family who became a policeman and whose experiences offer a winding, revealing (if at times overdramatized) path through the recent adventures of Northampton.

Some will insist that Northampton is not in any sense typical—that, for example, the presence of Smith College distorts and softens its experience. But Kidder does not claim to have looked for anything representative of a grand phenomenon. As with his other successful and sensitive works, including *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981) and *House* (1985), he has sought merely to tell a good story in a way that teaches us something. That he has done.

—*Sanford J. Ungar*

HARD BALL:
The Abuse of Power in Pro Team Sports.
By James Quirk and Rodney Fort. Princeton Univ. Press. 248 pp. $22.95

When I was growing up in a Boston suburb, for $2 I could watch NBA double-headers in Boston Garden or sit in the Fenway Park bleachers and see the Red Sox fade. Today those humble seats go for $12 and $14; getting closer to the action can run as high as $85 at the Fleet Center, where the Celtics now play their home games. The