

gressive liberalism, the death of *Christianity and Crisis* resulted from collapsed bridges linking liberal sub-movements—gays and lesbians, environmentalists, feminists, African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Liberalism's voices simply grew too numerous for a single magazine to encompass. So, in Hulsether's view, religious and secular liberalism may be stronger than we think.

But if liberals are going to reassert themselves, as Hulsether hopes, they will need to take better stock of the intellectual power of the conservative forces arrayed against them. The "democratic capitalism" of Michael

Novak and Peter Berger (both former contributors to the magazine), which seemed ridiculous to many social-justice liberals in the 1970s and 1980s, does not look quite so laughable now. To mount a new assault on inequality, religious liberals will have to reexamine their presuppositions about freedom and individual responsibility, as many black intellectuals such as Orlando Patterson and Stephen Carter have been doing. That kind of intellectual reexamination is the aspect of Bennett's Christian pragmatism that contemporary leftists should be most eager to emulate.

—Richard Wightman Fox

Arts & Letters

DANGEROUS WATER: A Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain.

By Ron Powers. Basic. 328 pp. \$24

Most literary biography leaves the image of a sour old man in pince-nez and tweeds chasing a fabulous butterfly. Sometimes he nabs the creature and pins it to his corkboard. Often he misses it altogether. In either case, we spend far too much time with the lumbering academic and not nearly enough time with his prey.

That's not the case with this account of Mark Twain's early years. It's easy to see how Powers won a Pulitzer in 1973; he writes marvelously. Also—equally important—he knows when to shut up. In an era when well-meaning hacks cheerfully rework the King James Bible, Powers lets his subjects speak. He quotes Twain, of course, but also his doltish brother, Orion, as well as newspaper accounts, letters, other historians, any source of light.

Because there's so little cotton batting, one comes almost immediately on the raw nature of the boy who became Mark Twain, a nature quite out of the ordinary before he ever wrote a word. In the summer of 1844, for instance, when he was eight, measles swept through Hannibal, Missouri. Each day, more children died. "The mothers of the town were nearly demented with fright," Twain later recalled. When his best friend

came down with the disease, Twain sneaked into his house, was thrown out, sneaked in again, and climbed into bed with the sick boy. "It was a good case of measles that resulted," Twain wrote later. "It brought me within a shade of death's door. . . . I have never enjoyed anything in my life any more than I enjoyed dying that time." Courage? Excessive sympathy? A desperate need for attention? Who knows, but this is not your average youth.

Another great flaw in literary biography is that writers often lead dull lives. Not Twain. He saw men shot and knifed to death, saw them drown, saw a white man murder a slave with a lump of iron ore—all before he was 11 years old.

Fortunately for us, his brother had a print shop, and by the time Twain was 12 he was working there, sitting on a box in order to reach the type cases, puffing on a cigar. "As he worked and smoked," Powers writes, "he was building his literary consciousness letter by letter, word by word, line by line. More than the adventure books of his young boyhood, more even than the Bible, these years of typesetting would anneal him to language by making it a tactile presence in his hands, with weight and shape and scent, the scent of the ink. The paradigm of typesetting remained a lifelong guiding principle of Mark Twain's writing and even speaking style. As fast and torrentially as his work could flow, 20 man-



uscript pages a day in the throes of inspiration, his sentences were always *constructed*, never dashed. The right word obsessed him. . . . The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.'"

We love to linger in this "gigantic childhood." Certainly it was lit by lightning. But this book is aptly titled. These were dangerous waters. Almost nobody got out alive.

—Benjamin Cheever

TELLER OF TALES:

The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle.

By Daniel Stashower. Henry Holt. 412 pp. \$32.50

On a summer night in 1930, some 6,000 well-dressed Londoners crowded into Royal Albert Hall. They had come to see and hear the renowned Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for whom a chair waited on the stage. One technicality set this hastily arranged public appearance apart from countless others: Conan Doyle had died five days before. Seeing no sign of their man, skeptics began stealing out of the hall. The emcee—a psychic of dubious gifts—shouted, "He is here! He is here!" Everyone stopped, and all eyes locked hungrily on the empty chair.

Conan Doyle's latest biographer, himself a writer of detective novels, tackles the hardest part of his job first: How could a writer of such intelligence and principle, a gifted physician, explorer, athlete, war veteran, husband, and father—how could this man have believed in spooks and fairies? A "cordial disbeliever," Stashower argues for "sympathy rather than derision." After reading this account, few readers are likely to rush out to buy Conan Doyle's *Coming of the Fairies* (1922), but they will understand that there was more to his life than Sherlock Holmes.

Born in Edinburgh in 1859, Conan Doyle grew up poor, the second son of an artistic, high-strung alcoholic father, and the lively, educated mother whom he adored. He got a decent (if detested) Jesuit education, and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. One of his professors, Joseph Bell, had an uncanny ability to deduce an entire life story from particulars of accent, clothing, and manner. "Well, my man," Bell would say to a plain-clothed stranger, "you've served in the army."

"Aye, sir." "Not long discharged?" "No, sir." "A Highland regiment?" "Aye, sir." "Stationed at Barbados?" "Aye, sir." It was a small step from there to Sherlock's "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive."

Published in *The Strand* starting in 1891, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes became the *Star Trek* of their day, and Conan Doyle grew "suddenly, colossally famous" for something he considered far less noteworthy than his other writings. So popular were the detective stories that, when the author killed off his celebrated character in 1893 (temporarily, as it developed), 20,000 people canceled their subscription to the magazine, Londoners wore black mourning bands, and members of the Royal Family were said to be distraught. Conan Doyle expressed only relief. "If I had not killed [Holmes]," he said in a speech to the Author's Club, "he would certainly have killed me."

Conan Doyle never got his fondest wish—to be viewed as a writer of the first rank. Stashower makes a case for *The White Company* (1891) and other historical novels, but doesn't pretend to share his subject's enthusiasm for the occult writings. Many fine minds took up spiritualism at that time. W. B. Yeats traveled far down the path of ghosts and fairies, and, like Conan Doyle, had a wife who practiced automatic writing. But where Yeats's traffic in the supernatural yielded superb poems such as "Lapis Lazuli," Conan Doyle's resulted in a silly book about Atlantis.

Stashower has turned out an unselfconscious, easy read—affectionate and fair-minded, genially short on the naughty bits now endemic to the genre. He hides a prodigious amount of work beneath the surface, so that what the reader sees is not webbed feet paddling strenuously but a swan serenely floating. Conan Doyle and his brilliant detective both would have liked this book.

—A. J. Hewat

WALKER EVANS.

By James R. Mellow. Basic. 654 pp. \$40

By 1956, when this biography ends, the photographer Walker Evans (1903–75) had done his most important work. In his last years, he spent too little time looking into a viewfinder and too much time looking into a bottle. Still, these final two decades of his life, for which the publisher appends a chronology, might have given a perspective to Evans's achievements