

ment scientists in Loomis's castle would stay up all night boiling frogs with high-frequency beams, transplanting beating turtle hearts into petri dishes, poisoning themselves with experimental bathtub gin, and furling one

another's wives. And, like Frankenstein, they occasionally ran disastrously amok: The bastards invented the first radar gun. Some things really are better *not* known to man.

—GLENN GARVIN

ARTS & LETTERS

H. L. MENCKEN ON AMERICAN LITERATURE.

Edited by S. T. Joshi. Ohio Univ. Press.
298 pp. \$44.95

Nowadays most people think of H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) as the scourge of the middle-class philistines he dubbed the “booboisie,” but in his own day he was at least as well known as a literary critic. Over the noisy course of a 15-year run as book reviewer for *The Smart Set*, the magazine he coedited with George Jean Nathan, Mencken reviewed, by his own reckoning, some 2,000 novels, most of them, also by his own reckoning, the work of “100 percent dunderheads.” Few things date faster than a cruel review of a bad book, but Mencken was no mere hit man: He was largely responsible for bringing Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis to the attention of American readers, and he helped put F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, Ring Lardner, and

Sherwood Anderson on the map of letters. As if that weren't enough, he was one of the first critics anywhere to recognize *Huckleberry Finn* as a major novel—and to say so, loudly and repeatedly, until his colleagues got the message.

All these achievements and more can be sampled in *H. L. Mencken on American Literature*, the first new anthology of Mencken's literary criticism published in decades. Joshi, the editor, is a Mencken buff who knows his way around his hero's monstrous output (Mencken plausibly claimed to have published well in excess of five million words), and though his selection overlaps rather more than it should with William H. Nolte's indispensable *H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism* (1968), still in print, it also includes a number of previously uncollected pieces, not a few of which are both significant and readable.

Among them is a wickedly funny review of



H. L. Mencken in 1927 at his Baltimore home.

Death in the Afternoon in which Mencken contrives simultaneously to praise Ernest Hemingway and skewer his all-time favorite target, the American South: "Not many current books unearth so much unfamiliar stuff, or present it so effectively. I emerge cherishing a hope that bullfighting will be introduced at Harvard and Yale, or, if not at Harvard and Yale, then at least in the Lynching Belt of the South, where it would offer stiff and perhaps ruinous competition to the frying of poor blackamoors. Imagine the moral stimulation in rural Georgia if an evangelist came to town offering to fight the local bulls by day and baptize the local damned by night!"

Joshi also supplies extensive and useful annotations that clarify a good many otherwise impenetrable period references, as well as an enthusiastic introduction in which he claims that Mencken "could almost be said to have invented a new genre, that of the satirical review." That is coming it a bit high, as Mencken buffs are wont to do, but Joshi is squarely on the mark when he says that Mencken "played his part—and it was a significant part—in establishing the American literary canon." Best of all, he did it with a smile.

—TERRY TEACHOUT

AN AMERICAN FAMILY:

A Televised Life.

By Jeffrey Ruoff. Univ. of Minnesota Press. 184 pp. \$19.95

Of all the phenomena that *An American Family*, Craig Gilbert's 1973 documentary series on the life of the upper-middle-class Loud clan of Santa Barbara, California, did not seek to promote, one was surely the law of unintended consequences. Yet, as *An American Family: A Televised Life* makes clear, that law reigned supreme. Not the least of those consequences was the first instance of the hall-of-mirrors effect that has become so achingly familiar in the age of O. J. and Monica, the remarkable way in which people and concepts ricochet back and forth between unbearable earnestness and self-parody, in which folks who've been on TV programs about themselves then turn up on other TV shows and write books to defend or explain themselves, after which

the whole process repeats till exhaustion. Published at the same time as the death of the first openly gay TV personality, Lance Loud, a member of the eponymous American family, this book can be regarded as perhaps the last faint note of that extended symphony of reverberation.

Among those echoes, I feel constrained to disclose, were two of the earliest mock-documentary feature films, both of which I helped create: *Real Life* (1979) and *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). In the case of *Real Life*, cowriters Albert Brooks, Monica Johnson, and I were consciously reacting to Gilbert's 12-part series. We were comedically making the point, stressed by many reviewers of the show, that having a camera crew around the house inherently taints the "reality" one is trying to depict. In our film, a documentary maker's cameras so distract a veterinarian, played by Charles Grodin, that he botches an operation and kills a horse.

In this thorough and largely readable history and analysis of *An American Family*, film scholar Ruoff suggests that such Heisenbergian critiques are just as applicable to other shows. Who, after all, thinks the camera doesn't affect an interviewee on *60 Minutes*? Yet Gilbert, who devised the series, chose the family, hired the crew, and supervised the editing, was drawing on the tradition of observational documentary to present at least the illusion of something less constructed than a network newsmagazine feature.

As Ruoff points out, it was in large part an illusion. Though he dispensed with narrators, voice-overs, and interviews, Gilbert still felt the need to impose storyline, suspense, focus, even music, on the raw footage of reality. His colleagues in public television went further, offering in the publicity materials a series of analyses, comparisons, and conclusions that, though disavowed by Gilbert, provided the substance for a great deal of what reviewers and commentators eventually wrote about the broadcast. Ruoff is at his best here, exposing the umbilical cord that runs between cleverly devised publicity and the ensuing coverage and criticism.

Some of this material seems downright quaint now. The critics, wondering whether the Louds were a unique breed of idiots for