

white plastic holder that opens as smoothly as the bay door on a science-fiction spaceship. For \$32, you can order Philippe Starck's Excalibur brush, whose hilt-like handle creates a lid when sheathed in its caddy. If your tastes don't run to trendy designers, for around the same price you can get a brush that hides in a ceramic cowboy boot. At \$55, there's Stefano Giovannoni's Merdolino brush for Alessi, its bright green T-shaped handle sprouting like a cartoon plant from a red, yellow, or blue plastic pot. Cross the \$100 barrier, and you can find all sorts of chrome and crystal, brushed nickel and gold, ranging as high as \$400."

That gives a good idea of what's going on here. Postrel is celebrating ways manufacturers and merchants can enhance profits by putting novelty to preposterous ends, thus giving jobs to crowds of designers. And the institution of silly or mendacious advertising is the mechanism the Age of Aesthetics has found indispensable.

Curiously, while attending to Postrel's book, I have been regaled by a full-page review, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, of *The Burned Children of America*, a collection of stories edited by Marco Cassina and

Martina Testa. The *TLS*'s review focuses on the damage language suffers from the habits of advertising. The increasing difficulty, as novelist Zadie Smith says in the book's introduction, is writing "an emotive sentence that has not already been used to sell humidifiers, Pepsi, or suppositories." The shrewd misrepresentation common in advertising increasingly "doubles for life, supplants, creates simulacra." One example would be the recent national deceptions on Wall Street, as well as those involved in selling a war to the credulous as if it were a commodity aiming at profitable mass acceptance.

Postrel even has a kind word for what might seem questionable "styles" so long as they appear to be new, such as young people appearing in public with metal studs in their cheeks and tongues, safety pins through their nostrils, or other types of "radical piercing," in the contemporary jargon.

If that is to suggest future American culture and consciousness, please count me out.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

AMERICA'S NEWCOMERS AND THE DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY.

By Frank D. Bean and Gillian Stevens. Russell Sage Foundation. 309 pp. \$32.50

If the American public's post-September 11 mood swing on immigration seems particularly stark, perhaps that's because it began just as we were recovering from the last one. By late summer 2001, it had become acceptable for national politicians, especially members of Congress, to acknowledge that they might have gone too far in the late 1990s with legislation that, taking a page from California's book, restricted access to public benefits by noncitizens. On September 5 of that year, the new Mexican presi-

dent, Vicente Fox, visited his friend George W. Bush in Washington to attempt a historic deal: the "regularization" of unauthorized Mexican immigrants already in the United States and the launch of a new "guest workers" program that would permit many more Mexicans to cross the border. Six days later, when a group of illegal immigrants, mostly from Saudi Arabia, brought this country to its knees, the deal was dead.

Instead of focusing on flawed intelligence, shoddy law enforcement, or extraordinary naiveté about what was going on in flight schools, many officials trotted out familiar and convenient scapegoats—the millions of people here without visas or with

visas long expired. In the interest of “homeland security,” we would track these people, regulate them, detain them, and, given the slightest excuse, expel them; and once more we would make it difficult for others to get in. How many Latin Americans, Europeans, Africans, and Asians eager to come here and contribute to our economic growth and intellectual firepower have been kept out—while entrenched terrorists, homegrown and imported, have gone about their business—we’ll never know.

So goes the sad history of American immigration policy: When in doubt, keep them out. If, in the process, we prolong a recession and lull ourselves into a false sense of security, among other consequences, that seems unimportant to many policymakers. But not to Frank Bean and Gillian Stevens, sociologists at the University of California, Irvine, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, respectively, who have taken the opportunity to remind Americans that immigration remains, on balance, a great benefit to the United States.

As they note in their introduction—the best part of this otherwise somewhat technical tome—Americans view immigration with nostalgia and, at the same time, anxiety. The authors do a fine job of exploring and explaining these seemingly contradictory strains in the national attitude toward those who have accepted our promotion of the country as the world’s best place to live. We can thank Bean and Stevens, for example, for challenging the conventional wisdom that immigrants impoverish native-born American workers and exacerbate racial tensions. On the contrary, newcomers tend to stimulate economic activity, and, because of the increasingly diverse composition of the immigrant stream, they probably help defuse old hostilities.

That the advantages of an ever-changing national identity and culturally enriched society outweigh an occasional sense of drift and disruption seems, on the strength of the data assembled here, obvious. One senses that this book was well underway before the events of September 11, but in the aftermath it is all the more relevant and necessary.

—SANFORD J. UNGAR

NO EXCUSES:

Closing the Racial Gap in Learning.

By Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom. Simon & Schuster. 334 pp. \$26

In the century-long war between the advocates of process and the advocates of content in public education, Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom are firmly on the side of the latter. They believe that all children in primary grades should be taught to read and do arithmetic, even if that means that some of the learning may not be fun. They reject the notion that standardized tests suck the life out of a classroom. They doubt that teachers can be counted on, as the process side insists, to make schools work without a lot of outside assessment. They have seen content-rich, test-proven methods succeed in low-income schools, and they have been searching for a way to use those methods to bring average achievement rates of African American and Hispanic children up to the level shown by white and Asian American children.

This book, their manifesto, is one of the most valuable guides to saving American schools I have ever read. Stephan Thernstrom is the Winthrop Professor of History at Harvard University. Abigail Thernstrom is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, as well as a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the Massachusetts State Board of Education. They are confident of their opinions and not shy about expressing them. But they are also quick to admit when the research says their instincts are wrong. They lob several mortars into the enemy camp—showing, for instance, that more education dollars are not by themselves going to rescue low-income schools. But they also demonstrate that the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act is unlikely to do the trick, either.

The most uncomfortable parts of this book for me, and I suspect for the Thernstroms as well, deal with the dysfunctional aspects of particular ethnic cultures. Black families, for instance, appear to have more trouble on average than their white counterparts in preparing their children for school, even when income differences are factored out. “The origins of the problem of inadequate schooling do not