

Current Books

comprehensible, doubtless rebellious mumbblings. Watkins stops short of what I think should be said: Stepin Fetchit was in fact a brilliant subversive, who, in his moment, deployed the only weapons of protest available to a man of his race.

A master of comic timing, Step for a few years considered himself a star. He wasn't really, not in the sense of such leading white comics of his era as Will Rogers, with whom he appeared in two 1934 films, *David Harum* and *Judge Priest*. But he was at least a well-known character actor. He was at first widely admired by blacks, who in those days were desperate to see at least a few representatives of their race on the screen in any sort of prominent role. Later in the 1930s, of course, Bill Robinson and Hattie McDaniel achieved comparable recognition, in equally subsidiary but more easily lovable parts. They were menials but not grotesques, often able to talk sense to their white employers; Step, of course, could speak only nonsense to his.

Step's fall was almost as swift as his rise. The movies marginalized him a decade after discovering him, and the black press and the NAACP soon turned decisively against him. Starting in the 1930s, the NAACP in particular pressured Hollywood to portray blacks, in manner and aspiration, as virtually identical to middle-class whites. The organization's efforts culminated in an early-1950s campaign, prompted chiefly by TV's *Amos 'n' Andy*,

against any portrayal of blacks as "inferior, lazy, dumb, and dishonest."

Step settled in Chicago and returned to his show biz roots—mainly working noisome clip and strip joints in the Midwest, doing standup routines containing a certain amount of the overtly transgressive material that younger black comedians were beginning to offer. He got a few small movie roles—not enough to constitute a comeback—and came to be admired by the likes of Flip Wilson and, of all people, Muhammad Ali, whose entourage he briefly joined as "strategic adviser." But he lost a defamation case against CBS for its very careless characterization of him in a TV documentary, and in 1976 he was felled by a massive stroke. He spent his remaining years in hospitals and nursing homes—proud, angry, but essentially irrational.

Shortly after the stroke, the NAACP's Hollywood chapter gave him a special award for his "contribution" to the "evolution" of black cinema, but that did little to assuage the spirit of a permanently misunderstood actor. By then, the studios that had once exploited him were excising much of his best work from the extant prints of films. Whatever his failings as an artful biographer, Watkins reminds us that Stepin Fetchit once lived large and was, at his best, an outrageously funny American citizen.

>RICHARD SCHICKEL, a longtime film critic for *Time*, is the author of many books, including *Harold Lloyd (1974)*, *D. W. Griffith (1984)*, *Clint Eastwood (1996)*, and *Elia Kazan (2005)*.

ARTS & LETTERS

THE WORLD ON SUNDAY:
Graphic Art in Joseph Pulitzer's Newspaper (1898–1911).

By Nicholson Baker and Margaret Brentano. Bulfinch Press. 134 pp. \$50

We think that we advance. Instead, we merely abandon the beauty of the past. Nothing illustrates this better than *The World on Sunday*, a magnificent coffee-table volume.

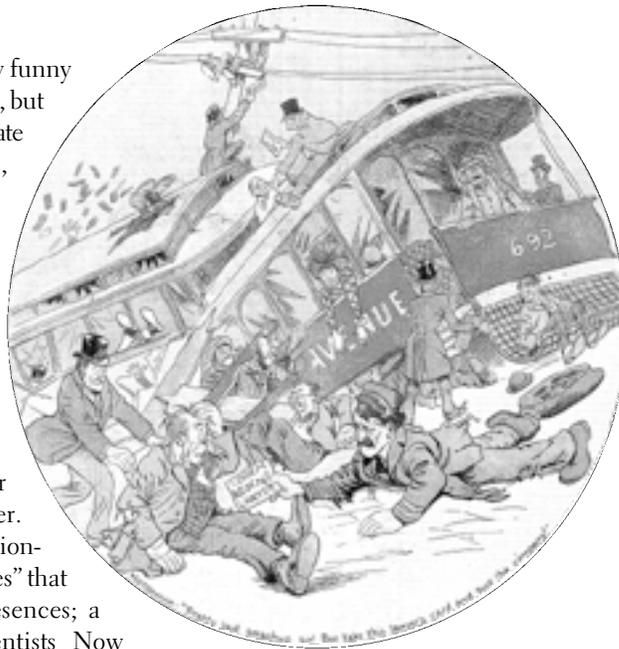
Joseph Pulitzer's New York *World* once a week became *THE GREAT SUNDAY WORLD*, a supplement-stuffed extravaganza that, as Nicholson Baker puts it, "weighed as much as

a small roast beef," and introduced the worthy bourgeois custom of lounging over the Sunday papers. Baker and Margaret Brentano reproduce material published between 1898, when the *World* installed a "marvellous" color printing press, and 1911, when Pulitzer died. With intelligent and insightful captions by Brentano, we see excerpts from nearly every section of the newspaper, including the classifieds and department store ads, but most of the selections originate—and rightly so—in the magazine and the humor section: one sumptuous, antic, multicolored spread after another, not

only a slew of very eccentric, very funny editorial cartoons and comic strips, but also breathless features that celebrate robber barons, Arctic explorers, bathing beauties, world's fairs, subways, skyscrapers, airships, and the most amazing phenomenon of the age, Teddy Roosevelt.

The *World* was a paper of record, at least in the United States, with its Sunday edition read by more than half a million Americans, yet its editors never lost their sense of giddy wonder. They sometimes slid into sensationalism—a spread on “spirit pictures” that purported to show spectral presences; a headline declaring that “Scientists Now Know Positively That There Are Thirsty People on Mars”; a lurid, warmongering cartoon on Spanish atrocities in Cuba. But even in the era of yellow journalism, the paper’s reporters dedicated a surprising amount of space to explaining the dizzying new world around them. The modern reader can still get absorbed by “The Busiest Hour on Earth”—a Manhattan rush hour—or the “12 New Americans Every Minute” passing through Ellis Island, or the way electricity was making Broadway “The Street That Knows No Night.”

The most striking element of all, and the one that most starkly distinguishes this ca. 1900 newspaper from its ca. 2000 counterpart, is the heady energy of the *World*’s graphics. The works of Pulitzer’s brilliant artists and designers epitomize what has nearly been lost in American popular culture: an idiosyncratic, nuanced, subjective vision. Consider a single illustration, and far from the best one: Dan W. Smith’s 1908 magazine cover about an upcoming carnival to celebrate the 10th birthday of the automobile. Smith depicts a luminous night scene at Columbus Circle, cars festooned with glowing Japanese lanterns and besieged by a crowd of eager swells. It’s like a Toulouse-Lautrec poster, the sort of cultural artifact that gives you a palpable desire to *be there*. Contrast it with what a Sunday magazine section might serve up today: a shapeless modern car, set against some vast and desolate landscape, perhaps with a skin-



A typically elaborate Sunday World illustration skewers both trolley safety and the greed of “ambulance-chasing” lawyers.

ny model standing alongside.

One finishes this book wishing only that Brentano’s captions had gone on a bit longer. But as Baker makes clear in his introduction, a large part of the goal behind *The World on Sunday* is to further the two authors’ crusade to rescue original periodicals and newspapers from those space-saving fanatics bent on mutilation and monochromatic microfilming. Baker laid out the argument in his 2001 book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. Here, he and Brentano mostly let the *World* speak for itself, and it makes their case brilliantly.

—KEVIN BAKER

BOOKING PASSAGE:

We Irish and Americans.

By Thomas Lynch. Norton.

296 pp. \$24.95

“Bits & Pieces” and “Odds & Ends” are the titles of two of the essays in *Booking Passage*, a collection by Irish-American poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch. They also describe the nature of this book, which meanders in many directions as Lynch explores the geography of his life, spiritual terrain included.

The organizing principle here is Lynch’s relationship with Ireland and the Irish. The