

# CURRENT BOOKS

## FELLOWS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center*

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### **GROWING OLD IN AMERICA**

by David Hackett Fischer  
Oxford, 1977  
242 pp. \$10.95  
L of C 76-42645  
ISBN 0-19-502159-2

### **rites of passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present**

by Joseph Kett  
Basic Books, 1977  
327 pp. \$16.50  
L of C 76-43465  
ISBN 0-465-07043-4

What went wrong in relations between generations in America? When did it happen? Those are the animating questions that inspired these two excellent books, one of them the first history of old age in any country, the other the first substantial history of youth in America. In David Fischer's view, the critical change in the status of the elderly occurred long ago, at the very beginning of the 19th century, when a spirit of social atomism loosened the ties of obligation between generations and elevated youth at the expense of age. To Joseph Kett, who provides a more finely grained (though less vivid) analysis, the nub of the problem has been the gradually increasing segregation of age groups since the mid-19th century. Society's confinement of teen-agers in educational institutions that shield them from the adult world has evidently resulted in good measure from the glorification of youthful innocence. Approaching our own time, the two books converge: Fischer notes recent improvements in the status of the elderly; Kett indicates that the isolation of adolescents from other age groups may be breaking down. An optimistic reader may conclude that the life cycle is becoming less coercive, and that our society is beginning to concede more dignity to the old and more maturity to the young.

—John Higham ('77)

### **DAY BY DAY**

by Robert Lowell  
Farrar, 1977, 138 pp. \$8.95  
L of C 77-6799  
ISBN 0-374-13525-8

Lowell's first collection of new poems since 1973 was published only five days before his death last September 12. It includes some of his strongest poetry since *Life Studies* (1959). A triumphant exercise of those powers that made him the central poet of his generation in America (and winner of every important poetry award, including two Pulitzers), *Day by Day* is charged with his relentless intelli-

gence and the obsessive moral tension about human responsibility that never became despair only because he regarded despair as an evasion. Many of these poems are about his third marriage and his life in England. Others are addressed to friends and fellow writers aging or dead. "This Golden Summer," to his wife, is a love poem in which the age of the lovers does not daunt but reinforces their autumnal passion: *We have plucked the illicit corn, / seen the Scriptural / fragility of flowers.* In "Our Afterlife (I)," he describes the energy and melancholy of this dying life: *We are things thrown in the air / alive in flight . . . / our rust the color of the chameleon.* Few poets end as strong as they began. Without the sentimentality he taught us to loathe, we can say that Lowell did.

— Frank D. McConnell

**REAPING THE WHIRL-  
WIND: A Christian  
Interpretation of History**

by Langdon Gilkey  
Seabury, 1976  
446 pp. \$19.95  
L of C 76-29738  
ISBN 0-8164-0308-2

Difficult because it deals with highly abstract matters and sets up a dialogue with a great variety of theological schools, Langdon Gilkey's book is unquestionably important. It picks up and advances one of Christianity's central but most neglected themes: Providence. Theology's classical doctrines do not, in Gilkey's view, allow enough scope for human freedom and responsibility. Neither does "process theology," stemming from Alfred North Whitehead (*Process and Reality*, 1929), do justice to the Biblical faith. Gilkey holds that in creating free beings God imposes bounds on himself but within these bounds establishes, grounds, limits, judges, and rescues the present. The novel possibilities thus evoked in man help to shape the future. To nontheologians who lack the leisure to follow all the ins and outs of Gilkey's laborious argument, one can enthusiastically recommend the final chapter. It summarizes many of the findings of the book and could almost be read as an introduction to the whole. The opening chapters, on the promise and menace of our future, show how the religious dimension cannot be neglected in any serious effort to appraise the hopes and fears of our present technological civilization.

— Avery Dulles, S.J. ('77)