

frontier a century ago." In Cuba, workers chanted while they worked; it seemed to Susan Sontag as if the whole country were "high on some beneficent kind of speed."

And if imperfections soon became apparent in China, in Cuba, or in North Vietnam, there was still Mozambique. There was still, as a group of Swedish students told George Kennan, Albania.

Hollander recognizes that many pilgrims were tricked by elaborate "techniques of hospitality"—modern "Potemkin villages," beatific guides, honorific tributes. But most travelers proved all too eager to be taken in. This willingness to believe stemmed from more than a desire to witness social justice; it derived from a need among Western intellectuals to be appreciated. In earlier times, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, intellectuals had struggled to advance secular values—science, reason, progress, liberalism. But now that those values have triumphed in the West, many intellectuals feel excluded. Hence, argues Hollander, they resort to championing more elusive, transcendent ideals (e.g., community) and imagine that in some distant land, some Albania, those values reign supreme. (A weakness of the book, though, is Hollander's failure to discuss the exceptions, individuals such as André Gide who did see beyond their illusions as a result of journeys to communist countries.)

This fantasy, which blurs personal problems and public issues, could be forgiven, Hollander maintains, were it not so harmful to the societies from which the intellectuals come. Public censure of institutions has become a rite of passage for modern intellectuals, and dissent is protected, even rewarded, in the West. But a society derives much of its self-image from its more articulate spokesmen; and if these spokesmen see nothing but ill, a nation may begin to doubt its own worth. In their eagerness to believe that distant Marxist utopias provide all answers, Western intellectuals, Hollander concludes, have demoralized their own societies.

Hollander provides a fascinating account of the 20th-century political pilgrims, allowing them generous room to speak for themselves; his conclusions may be a shade simplistic.

—James Lang ('78)

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

by Salman Rushdie
Knopf, 1981
446 pp. \$12.95

Born in Bombay in 1947, on the midnight of India's birth into freedom, Saleem Sinai is endowed with magical gifts — as are the thousand other Indian children born at the same instant. Like them, he is both master and victim of his fate, in a destiny implacably, and often disastrously, twinned with the country's. The son of a Muslim businessman,

Saleem has adventures spanning affluence and poverty, politics and witchcraft, peace and war, India and Pakistan, fact and dream, often plunging him headlong into national events: the linguistic feud that resulted in the creation of Maharashtra and the Bangladesh War in 1971. In the end, still young, Saleem waits mysteriously for death in a pickle fac-

tory back in Bombay, contemplating the fact that "all the 600 million eggs which gave birth to the population of India could fit inside a single standard-sized pickle-jar."

Like all fantasy, Saleem's chronicle is grounded in everyday life. Its sights, sounds, and smells evoke the texture of India on a scale no other writer has yet attempted. Ghosts of earlier eras, earlier cities are stamped on the ones we see. And an enormous cast of characters pushes through caricature to become entirely real. Yet beyond the people we meet is the insistent multitude, the ticketless travelers hanging onto trains bulging with humanity, the outcasts toward whom Saleem's fate inexorably propels him. Near the end, Saleem is living among beggars, in the shadow of the Friday Mosque in Delhi. Married to Parvati-the-Witch and friend of Picture Singh, the snake charmer, he becomes a victim of Indira Gandhi's Emergency when the slum settlement is bulldozed in a campaign to beautify Delhi. Journeying to Bombay, he hears the cry of the ticketless: "And now, at last, I knew how it felt to clutch on for dear life, while particles of soot and dust ash gritted in your eyes and you were obliged to bang on the door and yell 'Ohe, maharaj! Open up! Let me in, great sir, maharaj!' While inside a voice uttered familiar words: 'On no account is anyone to open. Just fare dodgers, that's all.'"

It is an astonishing feat to keep the reader exhilarated for 445 pages. Rushdie does so in a creative burst that appears to have been accomplished at a single sitting, so uninterrupted are the rhythm and impact of his story. Workmanship of microscopic detail does not often appear on a huge canvas. Yet here is a magician's brew that contains all, a mix of impossibles — and as impressive a novel about India as any that is likely to be written.

—Nayantara Sahgal

**HARVARD
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
AMERICAN ETHNIC
GROUPS**

edited by Stephan
Thernstrom, Ann Orlov,
and Oscar Handlin
Harvard, 1980
1,076 pp. \$60

Dealing with one of the central phenomena of American social history, this encyclopedia features essays on virtually every major and minor ethnic group to come to American shores, from Azerbaijanis to Zoroastrians. Why they left their homelands, where they settled, how they lived, how their grandchildren lived—such matters, as well as discussions of concepts like "American Identity and Americanization," "Assimilation and Pluralism," "Language Maintenance," and "Leadership," make many entries readable enough to qualify for bedtime browsing.

Americans with little personal sense of ethnicity will discover why the wave of nostalgia called the "new ethnicity" in the 1970s passed them by. But the essays will also be of service to the more "roots"-conscious individuals who want to know how established scholars describe their groups and what further reading they suggest.