

takes, of now and then becoming the sly trumpeter of his own praises. No doubt this book will be embraced by physicians and others who see themselves living blamelessly in an otherwise imperfect world. Yet it is greatly to Loxterkamp's credit that the reader feels a bond with this forbearing, forgiving, sorely beset man; he is the kind of doctor we all want for ourselves.

Loxterkamp is at his best when offering clinical vignettes and miniature character sketches of his patients, coworkers, and fellow townspeople. One especially affecting portrait is of a woman with Lou Gehrig's disease trying to communicate: "Her struggle, nodding and

grunting at a plexiglass message board. . . . Two letters constructed, then three; a word, then another, till they strung together in a simple phrase."

Only when Loxterkamp's gaze turns inward toward his own marriage do candor and empathy threaten to stray into confession and sentimentality. And when he vents his disapproval of certain post-Vatican II changes in the Catholic liturgy, he merely echoes criticism that has been better articulated elsewhere. Other faults may lie herein, but none would prevent me from recommending this book as a gift to any prospective doctor.

—Richard Selzer

Contemporary Affairs

THE LIPSTICK PROVISIO: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World.

By Karen Lehrman. Anchor
Books. 240 pp. \$23.95

Lehrman, a journalist and former editor at *The New Republic*, calls herself a feminist but disagrees with many of orthodox feminism's central tenets. Doctrinaire feminists, she believes, often fail to appreciate women's individual choices, especially when those choices place women in traditional roles such as "pink ghetto" worker, nurturing wife, stay-at-home mother, or even sex object. In Lehrman's view, these choices reflect the genuine needs and desires of many women, and champions of



true liberation should respect them just as much they respect high-pressure careers. "You may not like my choices (and I may not like yours), but aside from warning me about the possible pitfalls, my choices are really none of your business," she declares.

How does Lehrman reconcile this defense of traditional womanhood with her complaint that "the feminist revolution" is not yet complete? She does so by making biology a factor in private life but not in the public sphere. Sexually and emotionally, she ventures to argue, "biology will to some extent be destiny for women—just as it has been for men." But in the workplace, all that should matter are the human abilities that women share with men. This is a tidy resolution. But as Lehrman forays into the scientific literature on sexual difference demonstrate, biology is no clear or univocal arbiter of how men and women differ—or how they do not. And where science dares not tread, politics is certain to rush in.

—Martha Bayles

Arts & Letters

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE HUMANITIES?

Edited by Alvin Kernan. Princeton
University Press. 268 pp. \$29.95

The current condition of the humanities cannot be traced to a single cause. The dozen academic humanists who contribute to this judicious and informed volume, edited by Kernan, professor of humanities, emer-

itus, at Princeton University, take up various explanatory threads. One is demographic: the increased presence of minorities and women among the student population. One is technological: the impact of computers on the way people read. One is philosophical: the influence of relativistic epistemologies on the old ideal of disinterested scholarship.

Does the garland of causes make a

noose? It might appear so. The book's statistical appendix reports that while the absolute number of baccalaureate and doctoral degrees in the humanities increased slightly between 1966 and 1993, the percentage of humanities degrees relative to the total number of degrees dropped. Financial support is down too, as America's foundations decide they have other things to do with their money. And so is the more precious kind of support that comes from a receptive and sympathetic public. Snug—and smug—in their encrypted reveries, humanists fail to notice that the room has emptied and they are talking only to themselves.

Ironically, this erosion of influence is accompanied by a passionate insistence on the part of some humanists that their work should effect social change. In the final essay, David Bromwich, professor of English at Yale University, writes that “the place of advocacy in teaching and research has become so prominent as almost to constitute in itself a separate description of what scholarship in the humanities is.” Higher education has accommodated itself to the twin ideologies of “reflection,” according to which institutions of learning must reflect what is going on in the society they serve, and “representation,” according to which scholarly interest and social identity must coincide. (The African-American scholar wanting to specialize in Milton would be viewed, at least, as a curiosity, as would the Native American medievalist or the female admirer of Hemingway.)

Overall, this collection gives the impression of a Web-site download perhaps 90 percent complete: the image is recognizable but wants the last degree of definition. It would have been sharper if the authors had been allowed to undo a couple of buttons on their dispassion—but that was explicitly not their assignment. They were asked to be descriptive as far as the data permitted, and to refrain from judgment. So certain questions go unanswered. Was there a failure of nerve on the part of humanists who watched while their colleagues danced on the cutting edge (where missteps have left them sliced and bloodied)? Did humanists listen politely to nonsense they might better have hooted off the podium? Did they shrink before challenges (“Who are you to say what's important?”) when they should have resisted?

The forces that have buffeted the humanities are not entirely external to them, as most of the contributors acknowledge. The state of the humanities is, after all, related to the state of humanists. It is not self-evident, for example, that changing demographics should have led to conspicuous transformation in the curriculum. The changes were voted in. They were justified, perhaps, as a way of helping students “start from where they are.” But most young people know where they are. The study of literature and history has always been an invitation to explore alien territory, to travel the distance from where one is to where one might be.

—James M. Morris

GEORGE ELIOT:

A Life.

By Rosemary Ashton. Allen Lane/Penguin. 480 pp. \$32.95

No hidden cache of documents has been discovered and no drastic revision of literary reputation has occurred since the publication of Gordon Haight's commanding *George Eliot* in 1968. Why, then, attempt another biography? To explore “George Eliot the writer as well as George Eliot the woman,” is the reason given by Ashton, a professor of English at University College in London. Yet ironically this book has more to say about the woman than it does about the writer.

“Inquiring, skeptical, even rebellious by nature,” writes Ashton, Eliot “was also conservative, timid, self-doubting.” Ashton's retelling of the Victorian novelist's life (1819–80) is especially moving when she describes Eliot's insecurity about her art. Though fiercely opinionated toward others' work, Eliot withered at the slightest criticism of her own. To protect the eggshell fragility of her ego, both her companion and lover, George Lewes, and her publisher, John Blackwood, screened her mail, allowing only the most encouraging praise to reach her desk. Ashton tries to link this “diffidence” to Eliot's work, but the effort falls short. The best explanation offered is Eliot's own, which could have been written about many of her fictional characters: “I want encouraging rather than warning and checking. I believe I am so constituted that I shall never be cured of any faults except by God's discipline.”

—Sudip K. Bose