

ready well known: Clinton proved himself a liar, Kenneth Starr dogged him with a prudish zeal that most Americans found offensive, and the nation stumbled on. For Patterson, as for others, the Lewinsky affair was an inevitable escalation of the partisan bloodletting that engulfed Washington in this era, culminating in the election of 2000.

*Restless Giant* ends with a tight summary of the Bush-Gore campaign, noting that more Florida voters probably *intended* to cast ballots for Al Gore than for George W. Bush, but some of them—perhaps a decisive proportion—were stymied by the butterfly ballot. What is certain, says Patterson, is that the nation and its politics have changed dramatically in the decades since Watergate. The Republican Party has been reborn, energized by a new conservative base. Yet politics at the national level has become something of a standoff, with most voters clustered near the vital center and neither party having the overwhelming edge enjoyed by Democrats during the terms of

Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Sadly, the resulting frustrations fuel a meaner brand of politics, with little prospect of relief.

Still, says Patterson, the United States of 2000 was a better, safer place than the United States of 1974. Americans, especially minorities, had more rights and opportunities than before. The specter of communism was gone; the fear of nuclear war had subsided. The quality of life, “bolstered by the bounteous resources and receptivity to change that had always been hallmarks of American history, [had] improved in manifold ways.”

And yet, looking back on that time from this time, it seems so long, long ago.

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## *Serving Up Subversion*

STEPIN FETCHIT:

*The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry.*

By Mel Watkins. Pantheon Books. 352 pp. \$26.95

*Reviewed by Richard Schickel*

Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry (1902–85)—to call Stepin Fetchit by his gaudy given name—is among the movies’ most paradoxical figures. He became famous in the early 1930s, and soon after that infamous, by playing a highly stylized character: a shuffling, inarticulate, bone-lazy servant, generally in the employ of Southern massas twinkling tolerantly or fuming impotently at his ineptitude. From the outset, this figure, though hilarious to many blacks, discomfited their upwardly striving brethren, who were justifiably eager to set aside the demeaning stereotypes by which they had forever been represented in show business. In time, the latter view prevailed, and Stepin Fetchit’s very stage name—borrowed from a racehorse on

which he once won a few bucks—came to symbolize everything that was contemptible in Hollywood’s historical depictions of blacks.

Yet—and here’s one paradox—the off-screen Step was exactly the opposite of his public persona. He was a proud, even arrogant, man, whose fights with the studios (mainly Twentieth Century-Fox) for more money and more screen time doubtless did as much to shorten his stardom as shifting public tastes did. Often quarrelsome with directors, producers, and costars, he was a frequent no-show on the set. He was irresponsible in his off hours as well. His romantic life was something of a scandal, and he was a famously bad driver, often wrecking the fabulous cars—at one time he was said to



*Stepin Fetchit's "shuffling, inarticulate, bone-lazy" movie persona came to symbolize Hollywood's contemptible depiction of blacks, but his offscreen self was entirely the opposite.*

own a dozen—in which he showboated around Los Angeles and New York. He ran through the \$2 million he earned in his brief glory years as fast as it came in. To put the matter simply, he was, from the studios' point of view, more trouble than he was worth.

Yet I agree with Mel Watkins, a former *New York Times Book Review* editor, that it's time to reevaluate Step's image and accomplishments. I wish Watkins had managed this task more gracefully—his book is at once repetitive and digressive, as well as tiresomely written—but still, he makes the points that need to be made.

To begin with, Stepin Fetchit didn't invent the feckless figure he made famous. The figure was, as Watkins observes, a traditional comic construct, and not just in shows aimed at white audiences; literally hundreds of actors portrayed him on the all-black "race" circuit where Step broke in during the 1920s. Watkins has understandable difficulties tracing the actor's itinerary in these years, but he makes it very clear that this was the lowest, most exploitative branch of show business: Working conditions were unspeakable, performers were routinely stranded or cheated out of their salaries, and, when

they played the South, they often had reason to fear for their lives. Step early on learned to survive—and to be both suspicious of and hostile toward the men who managed these circuits. He couldn't see how his later studio bosses were much different.

Nor could he see what was offensive about his screen character. And in his best movie years—the early 1930s—most blacks approvingly viewed him not as an accommodationist but as a model of rebelliousness in the passive-aggressive mode. As Watkins puts it, "Many blacks were perfectly aware of the running in-joke ('puttin' on old massa') that Fetchit deliberately enacted. . . . They were laughing at what he *purposefully intended* doing. Many whites, on the other hand, laughed at what . . . *appeared* to be a confirmation of a venerable Negro stereotype. For most blacks, it was ironic farce; for many whites, it was sociological verity."

Look at it this way: Whitey gives an absurd order or makes a ridiculous demand. Disobedience or outrage isn't an option. But Step can get away with a very slooow double take, one that communicates disbelief at the imposition, followed by an equally reluctant shuffle to obey, often accompanied by in-

comprehensible, doubtless rebellious mumbings. 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.

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## 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