The Contrarian’s Manifesto

A REVIEW OF STIFFED: THE BETRAYAL OF THE AMERICAN MAN
BY SUSAN FALUDI

Susan Faludi is best known as the author of the 1991 best-selling feminist work, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. The subtitle of her new book implies that it is more or less the same topic, revisited from the opposite point of view, a sort of fair-minded attempt at equal time for the not-so-loyal opposition. And it may have started out that way, at the beginning of her more than six years of intense research and study. But it wound up going down some very different and much broader paths, indeed. In her own words, “Some journeys defy maps.”

In the opening pages of Backlash, she alludes, almost as an aside, to “the problems that have no name.” In Stiffed, she set out to pick up her own loose ends by exploring some of those problems. She ended up peering into the very soul of contemporary society, where she found a systematic malady that preys on male and female alike and makes bitter adversaries of those who most need each other’s support. Indeed, in her concluding chapter, she states with rather uncharacteristic eloquence, “If my travels have taught me anything about the two sexes, it’s that each of our struggles depends on the success of the other. Men and women are at a historically opportune moment where they hold the key to each other’s liberation.” Liberation from what, one might well ask? She gives it the name “Ornamental Culture.” While the issues it raises are too many and much too complex to be embodied in a single, simplistic slogan, it may well become one of the most echoed phrases of the new century.

It has been a long time since we’ve had a popular book detailing and analyzing any broad-based societal problems without simplistic rhetoric, much less with perception and skill. In the 1950’s and early 60’s, we had Vance Packard’s The Hidden Persuaders, David Reisman’s The Lonely Crowd, and William H. Whyte, Jr.’s The Organization Man. We had popular fiction and film such as The Caine Mutiny and The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit obliquely confronting some of the same topics. The works were widely read and debated and then widely forgotten.

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The trends that they detailed were, after all, still embryonic back then, only a few of many postwar concerns. Soon, they became eclipsed altogether by more immediate and dramatic preoccupations such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. But the trends did not go away. The persuaders became less hidden and much more persuasive, the crowd went from merely lonely to near-schizophrenic, and the mutineers of figurative USS Caines everywhere appeared on Oprah and sold their book rights in advance, totally forgetting their original struggles, while millions of men in gray flannel suits became victims of corporate downsizing after years of devoted service. The history of the last half of the twentieth century is one of broken promises, confusion, and chaos, with countless extremist groups proposing ever louder and more bizarre explanations. The one point of mass consensus seems to be that traditional American values don't seem to work any more, and possibly never did. Even the durable Protestant work ethic has come to be widely seen as a "sucker game," and what used to be called "the American dream" has devolved to the wistful hope of unearned reward, a sort of jobless thanks. Making sense of it all in a convincing and comprehensive way is no small task, but Susan Faludi is no minor writer. In attempting it all, she becomes the worthy successor of Vance Packard and company, and if anything, she surpasses their insights and their capacity for research.

This is not an easy book, though the style is crisp, lean, and totally approachable. What makes it hard to wade through all 610 pages (plus another 40 of notes and a very comprehensive index) is that we meet ourselves and our acquaintances on so many pages that it's impossible not to pause frequently to digest and correlate. It is also a multi-level work, with each new insight leading to still deeper questions, like a set of Russian matryoshka dolls.

"Ornamental culture" itself is a shorthand way of denoting issues as diverse as the triumph of image over substance and the economic transformation of the entire industrial age into mere nostalgia. One should be prepared to take notes while reading this work. It is worth the effort.

The book is organized like a well-rehearsed court case. We have opening and closing statements to the jury, which are dense, well-crafted, and not to be read quickly or casually. In between, in what is the bulk of the book, the author lets her witnesses tell their own stories, with a scrupulous lack of editorial proselytizing.

And a bizarre assortment of witnesses they are: dockyard workers, laid off aerospace executives, civil rights activists, "Promise Keepers," evangelists, gang leaders,
middle-class juvenile delinquents, semi-celebrity sports fans, Viet Nam veterans, Waco commemorators, and mainstream and even pornographic film stars. The stories they tell, of frequently chaotic lives that they themselves do not understand, come back again and again to the common theme of failed American fatherhood and crushed dreams. At first it seems to be their own fathers, the returning heroes of World War II, who utterly failed to teach their sons the skills or critical thinking they would need to cope with the challenges of postwar society. But it becomes the more generic “fatherhood” of society as a whole, which since WWII seems to have consistently opted to exploit, rather than nurture, its own members, until the only discernible core values left for most people are mindless consumerism, categorical disdain for the past, and an almost universal desire to “sell out, become absorbed, get discovered, make it big.” In Faludi’s words, “We have changed fundamentally, (emphasis mine) from a society that produced a culture, to a culture rooted in no society at all.” Ornamental Culture.

If it is not an easy book, it is not an easy topic to grapple with, either. The title of the second chapter could well be describing the undertaking itself: “Nothing But Big Work.” Stiffed will certainly not be the last word on the topic of ornamental culture, but as a starting point, it is a stunning journalistic achievement and a dark mirror unto ourselves. And it may well be the first reliable map of a new wilderness, one for which our fathers never prepared us.

—R. A. Thompson

“Nonskolarly (sik) English —(Anonymous—currently circulating on the Internet)

Five year phase-in plan for “EuroEnglish”

The European Commission have just announced an agreement whereby English will be the official language of the EU, rather than German, which was the other possibility. As part of the negotiations, Her Majesty’s government conceded that English spelling had some room for improvement and has accepted a five year phase-in plan that would be known as “EuroEnglish”.

In the first year, “s” will replace the soft “c”. Certainly, this will make the civil servants jump for joy. The hard “c” will be dropped in favour of the “k”. This should clear up confusion and keyboards can have 1 less letter.

There will be growing publik enthusiasm in the second year, when the troublesome “ph” will be replaced with the “f”. This will make words like “fotograf” 20% shorter.

In the third year, publik akzeptanse of the new spelling can be expected to reach the stage where more complicated changes are possible. Governments will encourage the removal of double letters, which have always been a deterrent to akurate speling. Also, all will agree that the horrible mes of the silent “e”’s in the language is disgraceful, and they should go away.

By the 4th year, people will be receptive to steps such as replacing “th” with “z” and “w” with “v”.

During the 5th year, ze unesessary “o” can be dropped from words containing “ou” and similar changes vud of kors be aplied to ozier kombinations of letters. After zis fifth year, ve vil haf a real sensibili riten styl. Ze vil be no mor trubls or diflucults and vruun vil find it ezli to understand each ozier.

ZE DREAM Vil FINALI KUM TRU!
The Shape of Rhyme

On March 15, just over fifty people gathered at the Ramsey County Library to be treated to a reading of the poetry of longtime MISF member Morgan Grace Willow, arranged around the themes of “community” and “place”. The thing that made the gathering unusual was that the majority of the audience was either hearing-impaired or deaf. Simultaneous translation of the reading into American Sign Language was eloquently provided by Mr. Ken Smedena, and watching his performance was possibly as enlightening as listening to hers, particularly for those of us with little prior experience with ASL.

“Place” seems to be an increasingly consuming topic in academic circles. A sampling of course offerings in recent years from The Loft, S.A.S.E., and the U of M’s Compleat and Practical Scholar Program shows it to be well represented, and it also seems to be one of the few definable features of the increasingly popular literary form referred to as “creative nonfiction.” At a recent short seminar on the topic, I heard a professor of English note, “You can’t have a memory or a dream of anything without a setting. If we lose our sense of place, we lose our past.”

Morgan Grace Willow has lost neither place nor past, and her gentle, flowing poems evoke a rich array of detailed images, from her childhood on an Iowa farm (“Harmonica”), to her non-judgmental, constant quest to connect with the world around her. The poem “Heraclitus in Powderhorn Park” is practically a sermon on paying attention to our surroundings. But there is nothing preachy about her work. Her images are crisp and unambiguous, and her work has an energy that is reminiscent of the young Lawrence Ferlinghetti, though without his occasional sarcasm. The evening passed all too quickly.

Possibly the most memorable poem of the evening was not about place or community, but language. Ms. Willow is a longtime advocate of the inclusion of the hearing impaired into the literary community, and the poem “Sign is an Anagram of Sing” is an eloquent bridge between ASL and English. It is reproduced here, with the poet’s permission, for your pleasure.

Ed. note: None of Morgan Grace Willow’s poetry is currently available in print, alas, but her new nonfiction book, Crossing That Bridge: A Guide to Making Literary Events Accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing, is just off the press and is available from S.A.S.E.
Sign Is An Anagram of Sing

—a hearing poet on America Sign Language.

In the beginning was the sign
and the sign made fingers.
In silence there was no rhyme.
Hands became birds, became singers.

And the sign made fingers
to carve shapes from sound.
hands became birds, became singers.
Vowels moved like caterpillars curling round.

To carve shapes from sound,
fingers asked knuckles to bend.
Vowels moved like caterpillars curling round
when voice bent motion to its ends.

The fingers asked knuckles to bend.
Language is the hand’s true mother.
When voice bent motion to its ends,
each hand reached out to another.

Language is the hand’s true mother.
When words fly off this different tongue,
each hand reaches out to another.
Syllables are shaped when sung,
as words fly off this different tongue.
In silence there is other rhyme,
when syllables take shape to be sung.
In the beginning was the sign.

Note: This poem presumes the right of deaf people
to their own language and, further, presumes that
language to be America Sign Language (ASL).

Morgan Grayce Willow

Editorial Notes

This is the first issue of The Forum
since the well-earned retirement of Helen Waldens as editor. Under
her skilled and energetic hand, the
publication evolved from a simple
newsletter to a more ambitious
format, with serious original
feature essays by MISF members
and an identifiable theme for each
issue. Helen’s accomplishments
have been rightly applauded,
and the new editor can only add
his thanks and congratulations
and humbly vow to attempt to
continue the same high standard.

As before, articles and graphics
are welcome on any topic of intel-
lectual interest and serious scholarly
bent. While the new editor is a
self-avowed curmudgeon and
unapologetic technophobe, his
intention is to neither exclude nor
edit any submissions for content,
only for coherence and relevance.
Responses to articles, in the form
of letters to the editor, are also
encouraged and will be published,
space permitting.

Upcoming topics for future
Forum issues include Books On
Demand, which is being touted as
nothing short of the next revolu-
tion in the publishing industry, the
emergence of the new “online
universities” and their “virtual
degrees,” the renaissance of the
national Independent Scholars
organization (NIS), and growing
concerns over the “kept” university.

Deadline for submission for
the Summer 2000 issue is
July 15, 2000. Submissions or
comments should be mailed to:

Richard Thompson, Editor
The Forum
1869 Selby Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55104

or email: CBRam@uswest.net
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### UPCOMING PROGRAMS

The Program Committee has embarked on an ambitious plan of four presentations this fall on the topic of the humanities in contemporary higher education. One program will feature Professor Kliger of the University of Minnesota. Prof. Kliger is the last member of the Humanities Department at the U, and he has agreed to present his account of the politicization and fragmentation of the humanities program there. This was originally intended as a spring 2000 presentation, but after much discussion, the Program Committee decided to expand the scope and time to include opposing points of view, on alternate evenings. Financial assistance from the Humanities Committee is also being sought, for a greatly expanded promotional mailing and a larger meeting place. This is a controversial topic, and it is expected to generate a lot of interest from outside MISE, as well as within our own ranks. Specific dates have not yet been set, but the preliminary schedule is as follows:

#### September

**"U of M Curriculum Development and Societal Change: 1945-2000."** This is a preview of a book to be published in November 2000 by the U of M Press in commemoration of the University of Minnesota’s 150th anniversary. Tentative Speakers not yet confirmed: Dr. Ann Pflemm, University Historian, University of Minnesota, and possibly Prof. Clark Chambers, retired Professor of History who conducted most of the primary research interviews for the book.

#### Early October

**"Humanities at the Center."** The case for reinstatement of the Humanities Department and humanities as a core academic discipline at the University of Minnesota. Confirmed Speaker: Prof. George Kliger, Professor of Humanities, University of Minnesota.

#### Late October

**"Innovations in the Teaching of Humanities at the University of Minnesota."** Perspectives on the teaching of humanities in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature. Speaker being sought: A professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature and/or others with diverse views.

#### November

**"Humanities Education in Liberal Arts Colleges."** A discussion of the teaching of humanities in one or more of Minnesota’s colleges dedicated to a liberal arts curriculum, or, generally, trends in humanities education in liberal arts colleges. Speaker being sought from Carleton, St. Benedict’s, Macalester, St. Catherine’s and/or other liberal arts colleges.

Closely related is the topic of the industrialization of the sciences at Universities everywhere and the degree to which wealthy corporate benefactors are being allowed to dictate curricula. This may be the subject of a separate program, possibly for 2001, or may also be touched upon in Prof. Kliger’s presentation.
INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS: STATE AND NATION-WIDE

The Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum (MISF) works internally through committees and externally through adept affiliation. Here are some of the parts that, together, add up to an attractive whole.

The Board of Directors is responsible for the "business" of MISF. Members are elected in staggered three year terms. Originally one year terms, they were changed at our last annual meeting to improve continuity. We are looking ahead to add 4-5 new members next November, for anyone interested.

Besides officers, these important bodies function from within MISF: the Program Committee, the Forum editor with staff, the co-chairs on Fiscal Agency, the Membership chair; and the MISF Website chair which eventually may become part of a larger Development Committee. Organizations in liaison with MISF include the Minnesota Humanities Commission, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Elder Learning Institute at the U. of M., SASE, the Write Place, and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS).

This year, NCIS's national convention will be on the theme of "Independent Scholars—the Public Intellectuals of the Futute." Thomas Jepsen <tjepsen@mindspring.com> is program chair and currently is accepting papers submitted for the conference; the deadline of May 1 was extended and there still may be time to act. The recent issue of NCIS's periodical "The Independent Scholar" lists topics in detail. Its editor, incidentally, should be commended for a high standard of content and layout. Pat Farrant, Editor, who lives in Iowa City, is any standards a true and exemplary independent scholar.

MSIF Study Groups

SCIENCE & HUMANITIES

The Science and Humanities study group: The new book choice for the Science and Humanities study group is Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe by Peter Douglas Ward and Donald Brownlee. June Dale (<June.A.Dale@HealthPartners.com>) has coordinated the nomination and voting process. The next meeting will be at the Washburn branch of the Minneapolis Public Library located at 5244 Lyndale Avenue South. It will be held on Thursday, May 18, from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Ginny Hansen, organizer and longtime hostess, will resume hosting meetings at her home in June or as soon as she is able.

PHILOSOPHY

The Philosophy group news as reported by Curt Hillstrom: The Philosophy Study Group is participant driven and addresses issues of interest to those who are willing to attend our meetings and help identify useful readings. We attempt to apply philosophical analysis to current problems which include, not surprisingly, some age-old questions. Because one of our members serves on an Institutional Review board examining ethical questions which arise in designing medical experiments, we have recently been discussing medical ethics. What constitutes consent by the subject for medical research? What about those subjects who are unable to make decisions for themselves because of age or limited abilities? Other topics, such as how to treat embryos and what is a fair method of distributing society's medical care, were also touched upon in some wide-ranging discussions. One conclusion reached is that as long as there is no consensus about the definition of what a human being is, there are going to be serious conflicts.

But as intriguing as this topic is, we have decided to leave it in order to tackle the philosophy of science. Philosophy of science entails the traditional philosophical task of searching for what is true and how you can know it. It is not to be missed. The May and June meetings will be held at Curran's Restaurant in south Minneapolis at 7:00 p.m. Punctuality is not required. For more information and specific dates, contact Curt Hillstrom, 612-823-5132 or curthillstrom@hotmail.com.

Board Notes

RECENT BOARD ACTIONS

The Board of Directors has decided to increase spending on the MISF website (presently <www.misf.net>) to make it into an interactive site with direct referral links, such as to the Forum editorial email address or to committee chairs.

A task force has been formed to explore fund-raising strategies.

The MISF bulk mail permit, which has not been used in anyone's memory, has been canceled by the U. S. Post Office. We will not seek to have it renewed. For the size of mailings that we currently do, it is not viable to maintain it. Any future mass notices will probably be sent electronically, in any case.

The NCIS national conference will be held in Raleigh, North Carolina, on October 27 through 29 of this year. There are no funds available for sending a representative, but anyone wishing to attend on their own should contact George Anderson for details and possible credentials.

Jean Cameron has been forced to resign from the board for reasons of ill health. The Board has accepted her resignation with regret and with best wishes for a speedy recovery.
I vividly remember my first glimpse of part of what Susan Faludi would later call ornamental culture. It was in 1979 or 1980, and I was standing on a street corner, waiting for the light to change, next to a teenager wearing an Adidas tee shirt. It's hard to remember now, but there was a time when shirts with logos on them, not to mention oversized labels stitched to the wrong side, were a new thing. I was dimly aware that Adidas was a brand of expensive athletic shoes, which the youth did not happen to be wearing, and I asked him if he had gotten the shirt as a bonus for buying a new pair of sneakers.

"No, man," he said. "I can't afford a pair of Adidas. Wish I could."

"So they gave you the shirt anyway?" I foolishly asked.

"You kidding? I had to buy it." I was momentarily nonplussed.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You mean you paid your own money to be a walking advertisement for a product that you can't even afford? Why would anybody do that?"

He looked at me as if there should be a white-coated attendant holding my elbow, with cuffs and a large syringe in his pocket just in case. "It's like being a rock fan, you know?" he said. I definitely didn't know.

"It's like you are somebody on account of what you dig," he went on. "Or buy?" I asked.

"Sure, if you can. But even if you just want to buy. It's like the identity thing, you know?"

Again, I didn't know, and said so.

"Don't you have an identity any- way?" I asked.

"Who me? No way, man. Hey, I can't even play guitar. How'm I ever going to be somebody?"

I had no answer for that. The light changed and we went our separate ways, with me suspecting as little as anyone just how far the trend of identity by fandom and purchase went, especially when the self-financed Adidas advertiser became old enough to have his own teenage children. I'm sure Susan Faludi didn't suspect back then, either.