

BOOKS

By Jonathan Yardley

Complex Works, as Always

There's a strong temptation to tie a year's worth of books into a neat bundle and issue cosmic conclusions about what it all means. The temptation must be resisted.

The books that happen to appear during a single year are quite a different business from the baseball games that are played or the elections that are held during the same year. It is possible to say that certain things were proved or disproved by the 1980 World Series or the 1980 presidential election. It is not possible, unless one's faith in the sweeping generalization is bottomless, to say anything comparable about a year's books.

The explanation is simple. The process of writing books bears no real relationship to the calendar. To be sure, publishers bring out books in "spring" (January - July) and "fall" (August - December) lists. But the shape those lists take is determined almost entirely by coincidence: X number of writers deliver X number of manuscripts during a period that permits all of them to be published withing the same calendar year.

Those writers for the most part work entirely independently of

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Yardley's Choice: The Best of 1980 Fiction

A Confederacy of Dunces,
By John Kennedy Toole
(Louisiana State University Press)

Non-Fiction

Walt Whitman: A Life
By Justin Kaplan
(Simon and Schuster)

Books Defy Generalities

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each other. Sometimes their labors produce books that by coincidence offer a superficial appearance of similarity, and one may say that it was a good year for women writers, or a good year for black writers, or a good year for the avant garde. But such years are exceptions, and rare ones at that, to the rule — the rule being that all one can legitimately say about the books published in one year is that, well, they were published in one year.

The year now ending illustrates the point perfectly. Is it of any significance, for example, that by comparison with 1979, 1980 was a relatively weak year for American fiction? Of course not: The novel is not "dead." And what, in any event, is "weak"? Do we have "a weak year" of 500 mediocre novels and one masterpiece are published? I hardly think so. Do we have "a weak year" if there are no masterpieces but (as was the case last year) a half-dozen novels of genuine accomplishment? Again, I hardly think so.

And precisely how "weak" was 1980. Well, it gave us William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*, Frederick Buechner's *Godric*, Louis Auchincloss' *The House of the Prophet*, Marcy Moran Heidish's *Witnesses*, Anne Tyler's *Morgan's Passing*, Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts*, Barry Hannah's *Ray*, Candace Flynt's *Chasing Dad*, Mary Lee Settle's *The Scapegoat*. If that's "weak," the word needs a new definition.

And here's another rub. This same year also gave us John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* — neither of which is, in the received sense of the term, "a 1980 book." Toole's novel was written in the mid-'60s and published more than a decade after his suicide; in no way can it be construed to represent any 'trend' evolving in 1980. Similarly, the stories in the Welty collection were first published over three decades beginning in 1936; they would as easily have been collected and published in 1976 — or 1986.

The point can be made about

one of the best works of nonfiction published during 1980, *A Choice of Days* by H. L. Mencken. The autobiographical essays in this volume add up to a classic of American humor and reminiscence — but certainly not a classic of 1980, since they were originally published (in three volumes) nearly four decades ago.

Of the certifiably new nonfiction published this year, highest marks go to two biographies: Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* and Ronald Steel's *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. But if you are looking for trends in the writing of biography, look elsewhere. Kaplan's is a work as much of imagination as of scholarship, in which the author employs discreet psychological speculation in hopes of locating larger truths about his subject. Steel's, by contrast, engages in little psychologizing yet paints a life in whole through the meticulous and scrupulous compilation of revealing detail.

Two excellent works of history: Michael R. Beschloss' *Kennedy and Roosevelt* and David M. Kennedy's *Over Here*. One author is a brilliant author, the other a brilliant established scholar. One tells his story relatively straightforwardly, the other seeks to draw sweeping themes from accumulated evidence.

Two equally excellent books about the South: Roy Blount Jr.'s *Crackers* and Marshall Frady's *Southerners*. What ho! A trend! Not exactly. Though the two writers treat similar subjects and reach similar conclusions, their styles and approaches are about as different as they possibly could be.

And what shall we do with Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*? Is it a work of fiction or fact, invention or history, speculation or interpretation? Who knows? Who cares? What matters is that it is a work of genius by a writer whose only category is her own.

This, then, is a plea for modesty. Think small. Don't wrap up this year, or any other, into bundles. In the world of literature, such bundles do not exist. Putting it another way, pigeonholes are for pigeons.