

*Blooming: A Small-Town Girlhood*. Susan Allen Toth. Little, Brown, 1981. 244 pp., \$10.95 (paperback, \$5.95); *Letters from the Country*. Carol Bly. Harper & Row, 1981. 192 pp., \$12.95 (Penguin paperback, \$4.95); *A Romantic Education*. Patricia Hampl. Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Winner of Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. 320 pp., \$11.95.

Three excellent books by midwestern women writers appeared in 1981 which, coincidentally or not, examine American values and yearnings for a more promising life: Susan Allen Toth's *Blooming: A Small-Town Girlhood*, Carol Bly's *Letters from the Country*, and Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education*. Toth's episodic memoir of growing up in Ames, Iowa during the 50s is comic and self-mocking, but also gentle and nostalgic. Bly, in essays first published in *Minnesota Monthly*, is an acid social critic, a "shrill gadfly," as she discusses issues of the rural Midwest and contemporary life in general. She analyzes reactions to Watergate, agricultural policies, and movies, combining local advice with a broader moral outlook. In contrast to Toth's lightness and Bly's practicality, Hampl's mode is indeed "romantic." Her book—the most far-reaching and significant—is a quest, one that she sees as more than personal, for a sustaining identity. Hampl's method, like Toth's is autobiographical, but more introspective and philosophic as she explores the hunger she felt for beauty and culture as a girl, as an American Czech, and as a developing poet.

Despite differences in style, approach, and personality, Toth, Bly, and Hampl all seek to understand what in American life, family, the arts, and history nurtures the spirit. Susan Toth, inspired by her young daughter's developing "sense of history," recalls her own rites of passage in order to pass something on, to learn how her identity and that of other women evolved, and to find which elements of the past sustain her and which she discards. Carol Bly invokes the Midwest's Scandinavian heritage from its "sexual chill" to its reticence and niceness in considering causes of dullness, loneliness, and apathy. She wants "ways out of banal life in our countryside." Like Bly, Patricia Hampl thinks many

Americans suffer from a sense of loss, which she believes stems from the inability to connect history, from one's foreign grandmother to World War II concentration camps, to the present, and from "our grudge against loveliness" and lack of cultural purpose and identity. Hampl realizes the terms "beauty" and "culture" have lost integrity; and she, like Toth and Bly, strives to recover an integrity and possess something profound that nourishes life.

In *Blooming*, Toth has a sharp eye for social rituals of the 50s: pajama parties, cruising in beat-up cars, the first embarrassing kiss. Toth, a literary scholar, essayist, and fiction writer, presents more, though, than a Dobie Gillis rerun. Concerned with the contrasts and links between generations, Toth dedicates her memoir to her mother and directs much of it to her daughter. Concerned too with the effect of a time and place on an individual's identity and way of looking at the world, she retrieves a past slower and more provincial than any life her child will know and reviews the images that influenced her generation:

The kind of woman we thought we would become was what Ames, Iowa, saw as the American ideal. She shimmered in our minds, familiar but removed as the glossy cover of the Sears Roebuck catalogue. There she rolled snowballs with two smiling red-cheeked children. . . . That gleaming ideal has become tarnished, scratched and blackened as deeply as the copper bottoms on the shiny saucepans we got as wedding presents. Many of us have gone through painful reassessments that have made us question the kinds of assumptions upon which we so confidently based our lives.

One impulse behind autobiography is the attempt to understand what went right and wrong in one's life and to use that knowledge to reshape values for the present. Toth finds she cannot indict an era that some label smug, provincial, hypocritical, and "hell" for women. It was after all her life, what made her. Instead of a neat summation, she holds forth "many tangled circumstances" that might offer insight into the blossoming of the self in a particular world.

That particular world for Toth is Ames, where "Nothing Happened." Like children who believe home is the duller place (or like Midwesterners insecure before other regions' claims to culture, vitality, and

importance?), Toth had felt life took place elsewhere. However, her account of victory and violent death, unhappy marriages, prostitution, and religious prejudice, prove the town is not a “vacuum.” Still, it is “a quiet town in a quiet time,” with a train station promising escape “into a new and wonderful life.”

In chapters such as “Boyfriends,” “Girlfriends,” “Party Girl,” Toth writes extremely well of adolescent crises and social stratification. She recreates girlish activities—phone conversations, primping, shopping—that may sound silly to adults but were central to her development. At the swimming pools of Ames, Susan and her friends begin their flirtation with boys, and such scenes make us wonder about the behavior each generation of parents considers natural and desirable. When Toth looks back at a sixth-grade picture, she sees in the students’ arrangement “our sharp-edged social gradations, the cutting cruelty of our assumptions about acceptability.” Toth does not document a decade’s conformity as much as a child’s intense need for affection and acceptance by a group. As Toth understands, a child needs a distinct identity, something to measure herself by, and a sense of belonging.

One value of *Blooming* is that it makes us question the models we once chose and those we now set before ourselves and our children. As she grew up, Toth measured herself by the models others provided from the prettiest girl in school to the librarian, a powerful white-haired “priestess.” Popular images from television and movies which she took to heart are deflated by experience. Toth’s jobs, too, allow her to try various roles. With a newspaper job, a teen-aged, red-faced Susan learns she must change “Most nights Willie plays around with his organ” to “with his pipe organ.” She also discovers “how one could be passionately committed to a job well done” and that frequently situations are “shrouded in moral confusion.”

Even as she exposes her era, Toth portrays a decent life. She developed the maturity that helped her find or make a promising life from her mother’s good sense, her own honest perceptions, and some values of Ames itself. And not all her reflections are social. She recalls summers at a Minnesota lake where her mother spent her childhood, experiences Toth tries to recreate for her daughter. These serene vacations offer solitude, “unconscious comfort,” a bond between family generations, and a timelessness: “Much of my pleasure sprang from my awareness that we were living much as my mother had. The past and present connected at Lake Carlos in a way I didn’t know anywhere else.”

As she had dreamed, the author grows up and takes the train to the “World Outside.” She chooses Smith College with its beckoning catalogue images of co-eds displaying “a look I wanted to acquire, that easy, confident air of belonging.” However, she arrives scared, convinced she does not belong at all. How her panic is resolved makes an apt, touching ending to Toth’s memoir. In the freshman’s shy introduction of herself—“I’m Sue Allen from Ames, Iowa”—she asserts her identity, one established not by her name alone but by the fact that she comes from a distinct “somewhere” and knowing that place “would explain a great deal.”

Carol Bly’s view of Midwest life is less benign: she is out for reform. The importance of her work is that she connects the bland, passive surface of ordinary activities to spiritual longings. Her epigraph to *Letters from the Country* is a warning by Selma Lagerlöf: “The soul is constantly about to starve. . . .” Born in Duluth, active in regional politics, services, and arts, and committed to rural life, Bly sees in Minnesota pretty scenery, normalcy, and “a tremendous amount of loss.” That loss results from “a restraint against *feeling*,” a disdain for literature which “champions feeling,” and a distrust of thought. Bly believes too many Scandinavian Americans deny the possibility of evil and corruption, as they accept all government actions and defend unexamined values. Because in essence they deny their consciences and souls, some hunger drives them to sensational, vapid, slick entertainments. The region, Bly thinks, could have made more of its Scandinavian heritage: “Our countryside has inherited not Grieg, not Ibsen, not Rölvaag—but just sitting there, cute movies, and when boredom gets bad enough, joining the Navy.”

As Bly writes of the role of the Lutheran minister, the socialization within women’s circles, or the fatigue and pleasures of farming, she connects losses inherent in such activities with patterns of apathy and loneliness known to the entire community. She theorizes about why people active in “all the old causes like Chamber and Norwegian national celebrations” eventually drop “derision, outspoken pessimism, and paralyzing incompetence—into the very organizations which once seemed to mean so much to them.” Bly suspects that during these people’s years of service, the “psyche itself” has been cheated: they “resent—however unconsciously—having been led away from the self.”

Instead of being fulfilled they have given in to “pressure to conform and serve.” Bly is not against service; on the contrary, she advocates involvement. But she does feel many groups have been vitiated by convention and says that the Midwest command to “be nice,” no matter what the circumstances, is a “malignant mix of repression and hypocrisy.”

Behind Midwestern wishy-washy responses lie “heart-breaking refusals to interpret life.” Heart-breaking because, as Bly explains, interpretation gives experience richness and an individual life meaning. Bly is no elitist who thinks only a few need interpretations, provocative theories, or fine arts. Instead, she believes the truth is that “some people are conscious of their ethical or aesthetic nature; others are unconscious of it.” Bly attempts to make “everybody” aware of that ethical, aesthetic nature. She proposes using “resource people” with “a way of looking at life” to guide others to “a network of serious interests”—in a sense, a culture:

We want genuine truth to share with one another. If we can't have genuine networks like theological or psychological associations, we are forced into phony ones. Why else, in our Midwestern loneliness, would we assume phony Southern accents, and cry “Breaker one-nine . . . ” into our CBs? It isn't fair that non-resource people have such poor access to books, records, and conferences in which life is considered lovingly.

In her *Letters*, Bly offers many such proposals, such as “enemy evenings” of informed controversy over issues, to counteract banality and “junk culture output.” She stresses the necessity of active thinking and civilized dissension to becoming responsible citizens and individuals not soul-starved. She has faith that life will be far better if people take time for reflection, aim for authentic community relationships, and immerse themselves in social thought, the humanities, and the arts. Bly urges that Midwesterners help their children grow up expressive by encouraging them to read literature, not as an academic exercise but as a preserver of the spirit.

It is hard to say how well Bly's faith reaches and converts an audience of “non-resource” people. Those who share her belief in honest encounters and liberal arts for all may disagree with her view of Midwesterners or lack her appetite for controversy. To be called “mealy-mouthed” is

not what most people want to hear—it attacks a way of being which, however inadequate, a person clings to as near the self. Bly, to those on the defensive, may be imposing her personality, her politics, her tastes.

Clearly, Bly is not out to strip people of their identities but to use the inheritance of Western civilization and the Midwest's native character to strengthen the self. Some improvements she desired may have come about. However, the life of the small farmer—vital to her—is still endangered, and video games, not libraries, predominate. Such trends, though, rather than negating her work prove it necessary, for she provokes hope and action for a gentle, content, ethical life.

*A Romantic Education* opens with five-year-old Patricia happily dreaming one afternoon in St. Paul over the picture book “*Zlatá Praha*”—“Golden Prague, views of the nineteenth century.” Her Czech grandmother who interrupts her with the command, “Come eat,” pauses to cry melodramatically over the album, “So beautiful.” The girl watches the woman wipe her eyes, exposing the vulnerable hollows her eyeglasses left on her nose: “Strange wounds, I wanted to touch them. I wanted to touch her, my father’s mother. She was so *foreign*.” In the book’s three parts—“St. Paul: The Garden,” “Beauty,” “Prague: The Castle”—Hampl explores foreignness, wounds and beauty, happiness and loss, dreams and that everyday life where people must come eat, and the relation of one’s identity to history and the larger world.

Hampl’s method is not straight chronological autobiography but a search for connections between scenes of her childhood, politics, “junk,” and art. Her style, with its images, humor, and generosity, reveals her intuitive, lyrical sensibility. (Her other books, *Resort* and *Woman Before An Aquarium*, are collections of poems.) For her as for Bly, personal contentment is bound up with the spirit of those around her and the actions of her nation. She tells how she ranted in “angry misery” against the Vietnam War. Hampl believes that while her views were sound, she suffered from “a confusion of personal and public matters, and it was made more intense by the fact that I had been happy . . . and now I couldn’t remember what that happiness had been—just childhood?” She broods on that loss, her grandmother’s silence on her European youth, her parents’ gilding of the Depression. Hampl is awed by her grandmother’s sense of self—“she knew what she was”—but distressed by her immigrant lowness. Troubled by vague yearnings, Hampl thinks many

Americans, children of some abandoned history, culture, and identity, are born with hearts “aggrieved.”

Hampl’s family does not confront this remote grief and, in recreating the past, does not push for understanding. Like Toth’s Midwesterners, they believe “nothing has ever happened to them.” Hampl, though, must “dwell” on things. Yet she is gentle on the reluctance to interpret life: “I am enough of them, my kind family, to be repelled by the significance of things, to find poetry, with its tendency to make connections and to break the barriers between past and present, slightly embarrassing.” This acknowledgement implies that significance, like strong emotion, can be overwhelming, too demanding and exposed for daily life. But without such intimate knowledge, her urgent quest illustrates, the soul starves.

Hampl also dwells on beauty, from a woman’s sometimes obsessive “allegiance” to glamour to Keats’s “truth and beauty,” and on mortality and the desire for perfection. Her reflections help define the loss that seems her birthright: “The ghost of a lost, smudged Europe and its culture, and the ghost of the undefiled American Continent: these, to me, are the two spooks of our immigrant heritage.” She discovers that the longing for such a culture informed her life not only as a poet but as a “citizen.” Culture for her is the sense that people share something profound and “peaceable” even when not conscious of it:

This longing for culture—how dead the phrase seems—has to do with a nation’s possession of some gladly held source to which The People remain firmly attached, and which both gladdens and consoles them. . . . We are The People routinely only when we are an empire, arranging to maintain ourselves as consumers. For all our bombs and death machines, our greatest evil (because it is daily, pervasive, and killing) is our cultural one, the zero we expect to sustain ourselves with.

In a culture private and public matters naturally coalesce. Without a “gladly held source,” Hampl’s comments imply, the burden of beauty and morality fall too heavily on the individual, whose meager identity cannot nourish itself or feel at home in the world.

Twice Hampl travels to Prague and there finds real images of beauty, culture, and perfection. The city’s “solemn beauty,” scenes of Kafkaesque absurdity, and the gloom cast by oppressive government reveal Prague’s perfection and culture includes “everything,” “the broken, the

dusty, failure, death.” To reach this wisdom and to use it well, one must be alert in all one’s senses to the aesthetic and moral implications of what is past, passing, and to come. This is difficult, especially if one uncovers horrors:

Here, in this part of the world . . . the imagination was wounded . . . [forced] to take in *terrible things*. Nothing after Dachau, after Auschwitz, after Terezin and Lidice, can ever be lyric in the same way again. And yet we are born strangely unscathed, we can’t help it, each generation as lyric as the last or the next.

The imagination may also be “enriched by this terrible history”; it seems for Hampl that denial is more killing than illumination. Her thoughts suggest that both the fresh imaginative impulse and consciousness of history should inform, often subliminally, a cultural identity and its images in the people’s popular beliefs, politics, architecture, and literature.

Beauty and culture are in the end ethical for Hampl. Her “education” teaches that a culture is ugly, corrupt, unformed—as a person is—if it pretends to be what it is not, if it denies the past that formed it, if it stifles or fails to renew the myths and dreams that sustain it. It is not for every American to go to Europe in search of self and the world. Yet Hampl’s journey reveals what the writer does for others. *A Romantic Education* ends with a moment of grace: Hampl discovers unawares the power of memory and imagination to use loss, move beyond nostalgia, and take hold of beauty and knowledge that can be cherished and passed on.

I could probe further parallels among these writers: all invoke F. Scott Fitzgerald as a genuine voice of Midwest experience; all link a sensuous, reflective apprehension of the world to creativity and development—an approach reserved for artists and dreamers in an age requiring computer literacy. Their differences are important as well. Toth’s entertaining story may reach a wide audience of teen-agers and adults, inspiring them to examine their images of ideal selves in ideal worlds. Bly proposes concrete action to satisfy spiritual needs. Hampl takes on the formidable challenge of defining “the integuments that bind even obscure lives to history and, eventually, history to fiction, to myth.”

Taken together, these works raise persistent questions about the possibilities for a pervasive, authentic culture in a democratic, pluralistic, consumer society. Is the “American Way” a comic book phrase because our founding principles allowed for so much freedom, eclecticism, and pursuit of greed that finally we hold too little in common? Retrograde thoughts, and much of free Europe (where our popular culture sells well) is also becoming a society of immigrants and consumers. In Prague, a spare socialist economy preserved a beauty created in a bourgeois period, yet there, as Hampl saw, oppression threatens the spirit. And ours is not the first age to produce cultural junk that sinks passive recipients into a dull and savage torpor, though we have surpassed all others in this. Do our popular entertainments like past sell-outs—bloody Elizabethan revenge tragedies and melodramatic Italian opera—offer possibilities for excellence?

That Toth, Bly, and Hampl come out of the Midwest is promising—one need not have an unjustly privileged elite, an ancient Mecca, a restrictive ethnic identity—to create a rich work. Hampl had noted that the search for what is missing in a life “ends up being the life”; the quest itself provides fulfillment. These writers, out of need, are creating an outlook, identity, and culture that will nurture us all.