

Books

Jonathan Ames's romp is more than a tip of the top hat to the master (no, not Henry James!)

When propped up in bed with an improving book, I often find myself sans pencil, and thus unable to scribble my knowing glosses next to passages of interest. Wandering over to the desk is out of the question, and so I resort to denting the margins of the i.b. with my thumbnail. As a consequence, I have developed a protuberance at nail's edge so well-suited to this practice that I have chosen not to file it away, in order for it to be passed on to future generations, a boon to their supine scholarship. Like Alan Blair, the depressed but somehow cheering hero of Jonathan Ames's grin-growing new novel, *Wake Up, Sir!*, my knowledge of Darwinian processes is far from intimate, but I deem this genealogical gift worth a shot.

I bring up this ghastly affair of defacing i.b.'s with t.n.'s not only because it seems apropos to get anatomical when discussing the work of Ames—raconteur of she-males and the performance artist known as Mangina—but also because *Wake Up, Sir!* generated an unusually high rate of thumbnail activity, to the degree that page 288 now has a small perforation, next to these limpid lines:

"When I woke up, rather early, there were lovely shafts of light filtering into the room. It was one of those summer mornings where you forget that the world is on the verge of environmental collapse."

When I woke up: Ames's book is a dream, in several senses. It's a superlative performance, first of all, marrying the graceful, nonjudgmental style exhibited in *The Extra Man* (1998) with that of P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975), humorist par excellence. Wodehouse's books have been receiving the royal treatment lately from Overlook Press—uniform cloth editions, whimsical jackets, spiffy endpapers. (The most recent batch of re-releases includes the highly recommended *Ukridge*.) Ames not only channels the master's zippy vocab (one "gargles" rather than simply drinks) but also his most famous creation, Jeeves, infinitely capable valet (and de facto superero) to the high-living, easily distracted, eternally put-upon Bertie Wooster. In this book, he's Alan Blair's "gentleman's gentleman," his posish funded with lawsuit proceeds.

But is Alan a gentleman? He has some Woosterish qualities; he's also an unre-

PLUM LOCO

BY ED PARK



Photograph by Travis Flotzbe

Carry on, Ames!

habable alcoholic, a hypochondriac preternaturally attuned to his serotonin and insulin levels, and a novelist working on a book much like Ames's *Extra Man*. (An aide-mémoire envelope contains "My Random Thoughts That Perhaps Can Be Given to the Narrator.") He's absorbed in Anthony Powell's novel *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and has started a book club devoted to its explica-

tion. (Sole other member: Jeeves.) He leaves his uncle and aunt's house in Montclair to visit the Catskills town of Sharon Springs, where he discovers he's been accepted to the prestigious Rose Colony in Saratoga Springs (read: Yaddo). Here Ames's comic gifts giddily bloom. Fellow denizens include a gargantuan program director so rebarbatively garbed that his employees could "file a class-action suit against his suit" and a sculptress whose stupendous honker sends Alan back to his adolescent perusals of Kraft-Ebing. Fittingly, events climax with a hasty heist of the sort habitually undertaken by Wodehouse's original hero.

And à la Bertie, Alan tends to talk without purpose—unless that purpose is to entertain. He realizes his knowledge of Buddhism comes entirely from tea boxes, and then wonders if in fact the traditions thus synopsized in fact belong to Hinduism. He trumps

pet assertions, only to discover gaps, which he quickly fills with yet more assertions:

"I just wanted to say that I think the word *is* the saddest word in the English language. To me it means failure, disappointment, heartbreak, and death. Nothing good comes of being an 'I.' Know what the saddest word in French is? *Je*. . . I don't know any other words for *I*. Wait, *yois I* in Spanish. But *yo* doesn't sound sad. Maybe that's why Latins are in a good mood most of the time.

Ring sequel shifts terms of the world, possibly hurts you

SPIRAL
By Koji Suzuki
Vertical, 281 pp.
\$24.95

The fantastic is a genre between. In the zone that separates life and death, dream and waking life, it offers a playful promise—or threat—of an experience beyond the limited efficacies of fiction: a story that can shift the terms of the world and perhaps even hurt you. Koji Suzuki launched a resonant modern iteration when his novel *Ring* was published in Japan in 1991. Since then, variations on his tale of a cursed videocassette with the power to kill its viewers have mutated across continents and through

films, manga, TV series, and a computer game. The boldest twist of *Spiral*, the second book in the *Ring* trilogy, is to anticipate this media contagion. Sadako, the vengeful spirit whose cryptic life fragments infect the video, turns out to be Scheherazade in reverse: She has but a single tale to tell—her own—but 1,001 possible venues.

Spiral's principal pleasure lies in the invention with which Suzuki works variations on the motifs of the original novel. Even as the English word *ring* fluc-

tuates between noun and verb, so both a videotape and a virus occupy "a point between the animate and the inanimate"—they need humans in order to reproduce. And indeed, it turns out that exposure to the images infects the body with a virus looking remarkably like a wedding ring, which performs its own alchemical marriage of opposites. The viewer is impregnated with the storyteller herself: a hermaphrodite.

Sadako's media empire stretches beyond tape to claim the first book as well: Its text also carries her disease. The claims this conceit makes for Suzuki's prose (characters find the locations and characters of *Ring* imprinted on their minds with "absolute fidelity") seem sadly overstated on the evidence of these translations. But no doubt function trumps beauty in a diseased hierarchy of values. Those afflicted are sure to be impatient for the concluding turn: *Loop*, due out next year. B. KITE

Ich is the German one. My grasp of foreign tongues is better than I thought. *Ich* sounds like they're disgusted with themselves. Maybe that's why Germans are so insane. They do seem to be better lately, though. I don't think they'll give the world trouble again, but you never know. . . . Almost all peoples have a dark period, though theirs was very dark. . . . Even the Scandinavians, who are sort of perfect—clean streets, good health-care, active sex lives—had a dark period, a brief Viking phase, but since then they've been very well behaved."

To which Jeeves responds, "A walk, sir?" Jeeves's shadowy presence—does anyone else see him?—suggests he's a figment of his master's alcohol-lucent mind. He's "always appearing and disintegrating," accumulating "like humidity" whenever Alan needs him. And Alan periodically fears that the Rose Colony is, in fact, a mental institution.

Mirroring the everyone-is-crazy trope is the this-is-all-a-dream trope. Both the first and last lines of *Wake Up, Sir!* contain its title phrase, and further contemplation (prefatory to my afternoon nap) reveals the story to be perhaps nothing more than the antic products of a deep slumber. One hopes Ames sees fit to stir up such pure fancy again. Here is a book, rigorous as a dream and well ventilated with wit, in which the model of Alan's car serves as the perfect metaphor. *Id est*, a classic of caprice.

PAPER CLIPS



AP/Wide World

Solanas: Paging Courtney Love

SCUM MANIFESTO
By Valerie Solanas
Verso, 80 pp., \$15

Mention of Valerie Solanas's groundbreaking 1968 *SCUM Manifesto* has become code for man-hating in line with Lorena Bobbitt. Who else would join her "Society for Cutting Up Men," formed by the woman who shot Andy Warhol? Avital Ronell's intro to this hardcover edition attempts to imbue Solanas with a visionary's stature but does little to disarm her over-the-top imagery. Ronell explores Solanas's struggle for artistic recognition and situates her along a path of '60s radicalism. She suggests that perhaps the manifesto wasn't meant literally, yet the sheer force Solanas uses in urging for "the replacement of males by machines" leaves the reader with little choice but to disagree. There's no room for fun ("Sex is the refuge of the mindless") or compromise.

Solanas is like Andrea Dworkin squared, showcasing the best and worst of radical feminism. She brilliantly lists her grievances against the male-dominated culture (note how much hasn't changed). Her anger is a raw, seductive call to arms for any woman scorned. Yet take away the vitriol and you're left with something very ugly, a Courtney Love-like morosity of "dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females." Despite Solanas's lack of viable solutions, her extreme fervor remains compelling and unnerving, not simply as a historical document, but as a blunt portrait of one woman's fury. RACHEL KRAMER BUSSEL