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SUMARIO

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EDITORIAL 3

ENFOQUES METODOLÓGICOS

La ortografía del inglés en el 2º ciclo de primaria. *Daniel Madrid y Eloisa Velázquez* 5

Ten tips to successful spelling instruction in primary education. *M^a Luisa Pérez Cañado*..... 15

Beyond materials, techniques and linguistic analyses: The role of motivation, beliefs and identity. *Herbert Puchta*..... 20

The Bangalore Project, fifteen years later. *Antonio R. Roldán Tapia*..... 28

Pupils talk about tests and cheating. *Kari Smith* 34

TÉCNICAS PARA LA CLASE

English - A global language for a global world. *Jean Stephenson* 40

Jonestown net café. *Steven Sylvester*..... 48

NUEVAS TECNOLOGÍAS

The word processor in the English classroom. (Part 2). From simple to more complex tasks. *M^a Isabel Pérez Torres*..... 51-9

CULTURA Y LITERATURA

Milestones 61

PALABRAS CRUZADAS 69

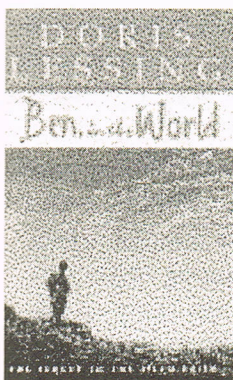
RECENSIONES 72

CONVOCATORIAS 82-3

INFORMACIÓN GENERAL 85

“disappeared”. Ondaatje doesn't give us a tedious list of “rights” and “wrongs” in the Sri Lankan context, but merely conveys that everyone has lost someone, and carries with them a ghost.

Doris Lessing *Ben, in the World* (Flamingo)



Lessing's latest novel is an account of marital and parental bliss shattered by the arrival of Ben, the feral, fifth child. It is a sequel to *The Fifth Child* (1988), where his problems were set out. Now, at the age of legal maturity, the misunderstood, maladjusted teenager goes out into the world. The novel is an

allegory, a mirror out onto an often cruel world, and is extremely moving and thought-provoking, as Lessing's novels always are.

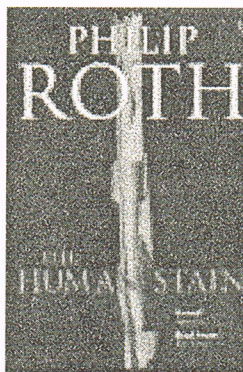
Saul Bellow *Ravelstein* (Viking/ Penguin)



This is a barely fictionalised account of Bellow's close friendship with Allen Bloom, his colleague at the University of Chicago and the author of the phenomenally best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). *Ravelstein* portrays the effects of a powerful personality on an impressionable observer, in this case, Chick, the narrator. Abe Ravelstein, his friend and academic colleague at a university in Chicago, has recently astounded everyone, including himself, by writing a book that has made him enormously rich. He appears as a largely closeted homosexual who contracts HIV and

ultimately dies of AIDS-related illness. The novel caused a lot of gossip as the causes of Bloom's death were questioned as a result.

Philip Roth *The Human Stain* (Jonathan Cape)

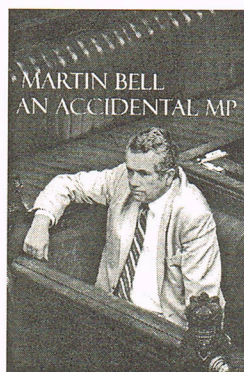


This angry, outrageous, novel completes the majestic postwar trilogy dissecting the United States which Roth began in equally high style with *American Pastoral*. Wildly funny, it is at the same time infinitely sad, and as it weaves together public history with private lives; it is as dense as ten novels.

Celia Wallhead

British civilization

Martin Bell
An Accidental MP
(Viking)



One of the things I enjoy about Christmas shopping is buying presents for myself. It's the only way to be sure that people 'give' me things that I like! When someone wonders aloud 'And what on earth can I get *you* for a

present?' not only do I have a ready answer, I even have it gift-wrapped already.

So that explains how I came to receive a copy of Martin Bell's autobiographical account of (most) of the current British parliament, his four years as *An Accidental MP*, the Independent Member of Parliament for Tatton, a constituency in the northwest of England. Why did I pick up this book at Waterstone's and hold on to it all the way round their two-floor, Cardiff store late last December? In part, I believe, it was to do with the photograph on the dust cover, which brought back memories of the now somewhat paunchy Martin Bell, seen here sitting truculently on the backbenches of the House of

Commons, from my visits to Britain over many years; memories of Martin Bell reporting for BBC News in war zones from Vietnam to Bosnia: in some ways a British Pérez Reverte, but without the pretentiousness. But in part, too, I picked up and held on to this book because I knew a little about the circumstances that had led him to stand as an Independent, Anti-Sleaze candidate at the 1997 general election, when he won a parliamentary seat in the middle of the Labour landslide victory. The greater part of my interest was in learning about the kind of man who could take on such a quixotic challenge as that represented by the formidable, though now proven to be formidably corrupt, Neil Hamilton, at that time the incumbent of the fourth safest Conservative party seat in the country.

Let me summarize some of the first three chapters of the book, in which Bell himself describes the background. John Major's years as British Prime minister saw the word 'sleaze' enter the vocabulary of the entire British nation. Politicians and others in public life seemed to be queuing up to get their little bit of publicity for having corruptly accepted money for this, that, or the other; or having slept with Mr or Ms 'X', 'Y', or 'Z'. Neil Hamilton had been accused of accepting money in exchange for asking questions in parliament in the interests of the Al-Fayed family, the owners of Harrods. In the courts, over the years since the election, Hamilton has been found guilty as charged.

In 1997, Martin Bell was out of sorts with his employers at the BBC, and was ready for a change of some sort when he was 'invited' to challenge Hamilton in his constituency of Tatton, to ensure that the man who had caused so much harm to British politics was not able to continue in parliament. An unheard-of pact between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats had been put together: neither would field their own candidate, and both would provide support of one sort or another to run the campaign. The pact was largely successful, but the greater success, in Bell's own words, was that of the people of Tatton who came out of the election victorious: Martin Bell won 29,354 votes, Neil Hamilton had only 18,277. The first Independent MP since 1950 had been elected to Westminster.

What does the rest of the book tell us about Martin Bell MP and about Martin Bell, the man? The picture that emerges from his account of four years in parliament, and of the issues that have involved him over that period, is one of a man who values his own integrity above all other possessions; who is far more in touch with people as individuals rather than as a 'mass'; and who is perhaps far too reasonable ever to

be truly 'successful' as a politician. The account of Bell's personal motives for agreeing to take on Neil Hamilton, and of all of his dealings with the Hamiltons bring out all of these characteristics clearly. Bell criticises Hamilton frequently, and at the same time judges himself to be a poor replacement in some aspects of his performance as an MP. Martin Bell demonstrates that he is well aware of Neil and Christine Hamilton as people, people in trouble with the world and themselves. Amazingly, he is able to see Hamilton's side of things and to speak on his behalf, as he should do for any constituent.

This same integrity, humanity, and reasonableness appear again when recounting his relationship with a British Army officer, of Serbian and Scottish parents, who became a victim of ethnic cleansing within the same British Army that he served; they reappear, too, when he writes of his work in the international campaign against landmines. Martin Bell the man, is always much more than Martin Bell MP.

An Accidental MP is very much a book of its time, capturing many of the concerns, and much of the urgency that have accompanied the change of one century, of one millennium, and the beginning of another. In it, we read of historic events that have marked people across Europe and the world, yet the narrative cannot be called 'complete' in any respect. Once the so-called Battle for Tatton has been won, the text loses a clear thread. Thereafter, Martin Bell writes as the journalist he was and is, giving coverage to a wide range of issues and interests, all properly those that an Independent MP can afford to take on, without the limitations of party doctrine, or the discipline of the whips.

A line that appears and reappears in the book reads: 'Becoming an MP is one thing. Being an MP is quite another.' Martin Bell, the man, stands out in this account as being the same honest, coherent, profoundly sensible man both on his way to Westminster and on his passage through the parliament. The only questions left in my mind are these: Can British society, the British establishment, continue to offer him a role once the new parliament has been elected some time in 2001? Indeed, is there a role in public life for someone like Martin Bell, or is he doomed to the round of after-dinner speeches? A place in the new-look, reformed House of Lords, perhaps? Sitting as an independent cross-bencher, of course!

Bryan Robinson