Review: Human Sacrifices
Reviewed Work(s): Paradise of the Blind by Duong Thu Huong, Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson
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church sermons at the women's college she attended, where she was not even sure she could lose her intellectual development hurt her emotional nature. "Why on earth don't they go to men's colleges and argue the students not to allow their manly natures to be crushed out by too much mental application?" Of course, they've been doing just that in my lifetime—women against wimpy nuns. In the United States, nothing so dehumanizes both genders as much as reading. To that extent, too, we still believe in the power of the word.

In recent American popular fiction, for children or adults, it's all too rare to find the intense pleasure in serious, difficult texts that is a leitmotif of Daddy-Long-Legs. Jerusha Abbott is a child of the nineteenth century, when, according to Lawrence W. Lovett, Shakespeare, for example, was known to much more than an elite in the United States. There's just not enough narration, that is, of the sincere enthusiasm for a letter to Daddy that says, "Speaking of classics, have you ever read Hamlet? If you haven't, do it right off. It's perfectly wicked. I've been hearing all about it. You should know, but I had no idea he really wrote so well; I always suspected him of going largely on his reputation."

The heroine of this novel doesn't regard college as her first job, alien to her leisure; when she speaks of "an urge of teaching," she means no conflict in terms. In her dorm room in the evenings and on a farm during the summer, she can't even read "because she never reads." The things that most girls with a properly asserted family and home and friends and a library know by absorption, I, being a woman, should be educated. This is limited by present standards, her method can't be dismissed as dated. Rather than denying her ignorance and confusion, she allows them to spur her on. She's knowledgeable enough to see that Jane Eyre is "limitation of the purest"—then why did she use a single word on that subject over Sunday, and declare my principles in my next. (p.135-136)

Like Daddy-Long-Legs (indeed), Jervis Pendleton is a wealthy man "interested in reforms and things"—small wonder, then, that Jerusha signs up for a course in Charity and Reform, for "the care of dependent children is a home she won't let rest; she musts often about her work. As a matter of Jerusha's orthodoxy, he had directed his attention and energy exclusively to them. The moral of the House of Confined Princes is "we have not been able to interest him in the slightest degree in any of the girls in the institution, no matter how deserving."

Jerusha functions as proof of that. Receding Daddy-Long-Legs, I see a plea to give women the means to contribute equally to the work of society. Jerusha can't be dismissed as dated during her early stages. She never reads the "things that most girls with a properly asserted family and home and friends and a library know by absorption, I, being a woman, should be educated. This is limited by present standards, her method can't be dismissed as dated. Rather than denying her ignorance and confusion, she allows them to spur her on. She's knowledgeable enough to see that Jane Eyre is "limitation of the purest"—then why did she use a single word on that subject over Sunday, and declare my principles in my next. (p.135-136)

In this respect, she may still be ahead of her day. "Your uncle is like a lot of people I've met," she tells the young man in the story of her life as a student at the Sunday school. "They don't know what heaven is made of, how to know it's worth going to. And when they wake up, they had just enough time to grab a crumb of real life, to scramble for some last moment of profit—at any price. They are their own tragedy. Ours, as well. (p.219)

The problem is that neither Chinh nor any other party member ever shown performing a worthy activity of any kind. Chinh's wife is a veteran Party member who comes from 100-percent working-class stock and serves as dean of the philosophy department at the Communist Youth League School of Young Cadres though she is herself barely educated. Chinh is a "real little tyrant," and the party's East German "exported workers" in Russia some-

Human sacrifices

by Marilyn B. Young


T is a POST-WAR NOVEL, most of whose action takes place during the war. The novel is entirely absent from the text. Paradise of the Blind opens in a dormitory for Viet- namese "exported workers" in Russia sometime in the 1980s and tells its story in flash-

backs. The war against the French is briefly mentioned, but there is no historical reference in the text to the subsequent wars against the United States and China, although Duong Thu Huong raises in both this account of rural and urban northern Vietnam over the past three decades, no bomb falls, no one dies. Whether this is an internet or the war happens, almost instead, is the establishment of Communist Party rule, embodied here in the person of the heroine's awful uncle. And what Communist Party rule requires is even less ade-

sacrifice: sacrifice on behalf of greedily, immoral and stupid officials; sacrifice for such as land reform, which are both misguided and unjust.

By choosing to occlude the war, with its suffering and necessity to overthrow a repressive government, Duong Thu Huong is able to sustain her unrelenting focus on the self-selling activities of a crass and unscrupulous bureaucracy and its willing, even eager victims.

Paradise of the Blind is a political al-

egogy disguised as a family chronicle. The novel, hangs, has been accused of "sacrificing the limits of human feeling! (p.87)"

T HE ATTITUDE OF Duong Thu Huong toward the ordinary Vietnamese with whom she has woven her characters is ambiguous. Like Hang's mother, many of them seem to love those who enslave them. Yet poor but honest peddler, or a village girl with no illusions about men like Chinh, whom she forlornly calls "a real little tyrant," and the dear is a self-sacrificing devotion to his wife and children, which is all too rare to find in the United States, nothing so dehumanizes both genders as much as reading. To that extent, too, we still believe in the power of the word.

Duong Thu Huong, inspector; the director of the state grocery; the second party secretary; the former presi-
dent of the local commune and his successor; the pork butcher...and two families supported by their overseas relatives." It has become a "coppice of ambition" at the fixed center of which Hang sees the image of Madame Hai, who killed a corrupt village official, set fire to his house and then bunged herself amidst the flames. "I sat down," the novel ends, "clipping my chin in my hands, and dreamed of different worlds, of the cool shade of a university auditorium, of a distant port where a plane could land and take off."

The novel opens with a story of the less convincing moments in the novel, to explain the behavior of men like Uncle Chinh. Little Sixtine; a student studying in Moscow ex-

Duoing Thu Huong, you must understand, even if it hurts. Your uncle is like a lot of people I've known. They've worn themselves out trying to recreate heaven on earth. But their intelligence wasn't up to it. They don't know what heaven is made of, how to know it's worth going to. And when they wake up, they had just enough time to grab a crumb of real life, to scramble for some last moment of profit—at any price. They are their own tragedy. Ours, as well. (p.219)

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Delusions of gender

by E.J. Graff


Virginia Woolf understood that gender is an arbitrary category, and that it is a virtual, not biological, construct. Even after Orlando's celebrated change from male to female, "her sex changed far more frequently than those who wore only one kind of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she rewove a spoilful harvest by this device; they express little of her stamina and its experiences multiplied. In every human being a vaccination from one sex to the other takes place every day, about the same clothes that the male keep or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above." Or, as we say these days, all gender is drag.

Gender is a hot topic just now. From The Crying Game, to Buffalo's hit MTV video Supermodel (in drag), from academic books like Veiled Interests to a current exhibition at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, high-brow pop culture is play- ing with the question, Is it a man or a woman? But to some, the question is anything but playful. Several recent novels take us inside women whose lives present that question to the world. Although these two books have very different styles, both give us an insight into how gender predilections can shape a life-and into how sternly our culture enforces gender.

For those of us who feel our gender al- so changes itself inside as we feel it, the book by E.J. Graff, Stone Butch Blues is a walk into a foreign—and at times, terrifyingly black—country. Before starting the book, I had some definite feminist opinions. When I put it down at 3:30 in the morning, those opinions had evaporated.

By the time she learns to talk, Jess Goldberg is an involuntary gender outlaw. If you want to know if you're curious about what is it inside us that swim toward society, you'll need another book. The value in this novel—and it's very valuable—is in having the chance to see the world from Jess's point of view. For her it's never as simple as dressing as a boy; the question is, rather, how the world responds to her.

I longed to be everything the grown- ups wanted, so they would love me.... But there was nothing about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: "Is that a boy or a girl?" (p. 13)

People may enjoy playing with this question in art or entertainment, but we're often furious when it confronts us in daily life. Stone Butch Blues is the story of how that fury shapes Jess's life. It's a coming-of-age story that goes through three stages: Jess comes out in the bars of Buffalo, she lives as a man, and finally returns to the commun- ity from which she's been exiled.

If the first stage was the whole book, Stone Butch Blues would be interesting but not required reading. The writing is earnest and plain as the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- sion-the air I breathed, the spatial dimen- 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