

States of the Union

MEN AT MIDDLE AGE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



THE EDITOR has sent me three books about what it is like to be middle-aged. Why he has asked *me* to assess these works I can't imagine. What do I know about being middle-aged?

Well, what did King Lear know about being old? Plenty. "I will be a pattern of all patience," he said.

I have little patience for the books at hand; they do not speak to my middle years. But I shall tell you something about them, and perhaps they will speak to yours.

First, though, let me explain how a man knows he is middle-aged. In my case the signs are legion:

I hold the steering wheel with both hands.

I read more history, less fiction; even Dostoevsky can seem sophomoric.

I enjoy emptying my wastebasket.

I do not play touch football.

I do not daydream.

I buy no candy.

I climb no oaks.

I forget what everyone said at last Saturday night's dinner party, especially what *I* said.

I write more letters, make fewer phone calls.

I wake up before the alarm rings.

I fill in check stubs, keep close accounts.

I dream of trolleys.

I fall asleep at concerts—a sleep of the charmed.

I talk mincingly to our cat.

I do double acrostics.

I hope for less from strangers, for more from friends.

I wear shirts a size bigger than before (but I do not yet wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled).

And something else—something that occurred to me the other day while I was reading poems to a class of schoolchildren from a book I wrote eight years ago. The back of the book jacket has my picture on it, so as I stood before the children

and read from the volume they could see me twice—then and now. "Is that you?" one of them asked. "Is it really you?"

It is a question any middle-aged man worth his years might ask himself. *Is it really me?*

Let us see is this real,

Let us see is this real,

sang the Sioux warrior before battle,

This life I am living.

Now for the books. The most gladsome of the three is *The Sorcerer of Bolinas Reef* (Random House, 266 pp., \$8.95), an autobiography, sort of, by Charles (*The Greening of America*) Reich. Reich is 48, but his middle years seem to have been different from yours and mine. They recall one's adolescence.

The most sullen is Pat Watters' book, which he has chosen to call *The Angry Middle-Aged Man: The Crisis of the Last Minority* (Grossman/Viking, 190 pp., \$7.95). It, too, has the feel of an autobiography. The first chapter, where Watters gives us the details of his personal struggles, is brilliant. The rest sinks into the bottomlands of first-person journalism, often bordering on tantrum. More adolescence.

The silliest is Peter Chew's *The Inner World of the Middle-Aged Man* (Macmillan, 352 pp., \$8.95). According to the flap, Chew once worked for the *National Observer*, where a fair amount of the book first appeared. It still bears the mark of newspaper featuredom: a collection of short pieces in which various experts pontificate on middle-age miseries.

Chew's work first: It arose, he says, from "the chance remark of a friend" made on a chilly day as the two watched their sons play football. "We drifted into a lugubrious discussion of the high cost of raising children, the latest marital crackups . . . and the morbid details of a contemporary's fatal heart attack. . . ." At that point the friend shot his dazzling bolt: Maybe, he mused, "there was some kind of

'middle-age crisis' that everyone went through. . . ."

That did it. Chew started reading Jung, Freud and Robert Pirsig; then he interviewed a few dozen mental health types and traveled widely in search of middle-aged men and their crises. He was seldom disappointed. Nearly everyone he met seemed at the end of his tether—getting divorced, shloshing around in whiskey, chasing nymphets, or all of the above. They were a dour and brooding lot. They fretted about their mortality—apparently the harsh truth had just occurred to them—and they asked questions like, "What is a marriage really about?" If the answers were delayed, some of the truth-seekers took up Zen or went into monasteries. There is much commotion here, but it is lightweight and swirly, like stuff from a leaky pillow.

Pat Watters' inner world is more believable, if only because it is described from the inside looking out. A veteran and distinguished civil rights reporter based in Atlanta, Watters has always been at his best when he is at his angriest. He is angry now, in part, because he awoke one morning to find he had lost his job as editor with the Southern Regional Council after putting in 12 years of underpaid, underpraised service. Later that week still more of his fragile roof fell in: A close friend was told he had cancer; Watters' mother fell down in the Big Star supermarket and broke her hip; and his bank account registered empty.

These are not unfamiliar problems to the over-40 set; what lends them an uncommon freshness here is Watters' honesty. He feels guilty about his mother—what else?—because he has neglected her all these years, not phoning her often enough, not *thinking* about her. On account of things that go bump in the night he develops a mild case of insomnia, sitting in his darkened living room till dawn and wincing with "each stab of unreasoning ter-

ror." It's a bona fide middle-age crisis, all right, just the sort Chew was looking for and never found.

In the end, Watters turns on his country—not just the government but the whole national "climate"—and blames it for his troubles. "This country," he complains, "has taken so much of the joy and creative pleasure from the basics of my existence. . . ." And a bit later, after a series of small but nasty run-ins with a cop, a realtor and a nurse, he tells himself, "You are loose in a land of loveless, unlovable people, made that way by a country you can't bring yourself to feel is fit to raise children in."

All of which is good for consciousness-raising but fatal to the book. Watters looks for fellow victims, other middle-aged men fired from jobs and soured on America. He finds some and tapes their stories—sad, bewildered, endless narrations on the vicissitudes of being in mid-passage. We get it all verbatim, or so it seems. (Not everyone he listens to is angry; some of his subjects are merely docile, and this further enrages our short-fused author.) "The business of an editor," said William Allen White, "is to turn his private prejudices into public issues," and that is what Watters has tried to do—alas, unsuccessfully.

CHARLES REICH has gone still further, attempting to convert his personal victories into material for a nationwide spiritual crusade. Reich is something of a puzzle. He seems to have stood the usual processes of psychological development on their head, leading a staid, careerist's existence in his youth, then exploding into adolescent glory in middle age.

His upside-downness makes Reich an ideal barometer of youth's different moods, whatever the decade. In the '50s he went to Washington as Justice Hugo Black's clerk and stayed on to work for a prestigious law firm. He wore Brooks Brothers suits, dined at chic restaurants and

dated Wellesley graduates. He was *making it*.

In the '60s—you guessed it—he taught at Yale, where he wrote a book announcing the coming of universal love, equality and peace. People lapped it up, especially the young. Reich made friends with his students, let his hair grow and smoked pot. He was a flower child with an egghead vocabulary.

In the '70s something else occurred. He realized that he had never made love to anyone—no sexual intercourse, nothing. The chastity was painful, but he didn't seem able to do anything about it. At length he repaired to San Francisco—that city of benign breakthroughs—and there sure enough, he learned to make love. That his partners were mostly male is interesting but not, I think, germane to this extraordinary tale. What pleases one is that Reich succeeded in setting free a lifetime's worth of suppressed emotions some 40 years after fate, or his parents, had locked them up and thrown away the key. It is the greening of Charles Reich, and it is good to look upon.

But then, just when he should have stopped, he goes off on another tangent: He seeks political paradise through individual salvation. It is not enough for Reich to have achieved a measure of fulfillment; *everyone* must be fulfilled, whether they want to or not. "I have come to the conclusion," he writes, "that personal growth represents the one and only adequate means of bringing about fundamental political change in this country. . . . What I propose is nothing less than a revolution against alienation itself. . . ." Where have we heard that before? Among the young cultists and communards of the '70s, naturally. Reich's barometer is still working.

That reminds me of yet another sign of my middle-agedness, one I should have mentioned earlier: I no longer propose revolutions; they scare me half to death.