

THE AMERICAN NOVEL AND THE WAY WE LIVE NOW: By John W. Aldridge. 166 ...

By RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

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NONFICTION IN BRIEF

THE AMERICAN NOVEL AND THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

By John W. Aldridge.

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John W. Aldridge has never approved of the way we live. In "After the Lost Generation," his earliest work, he complained that young American novelists "have been constantly handicapped by the emptiness of the characters and situations about which they have been obliged to write." Some three decades later, matters do not seem to have improved.

"Rampant mediocrity," Mr. Aldridge tells us in "The American Novel and the Way We Live Now," "has become a major characterizing feature of our

time." Narcissism pervades our lives, and "mere entropy is loosed" throughout the land.

Given such unpromising material, it's no wonder that most of the novelists Mr. Aldridge examines in these elegant essays tend to suffer the critical consequences. If Mr. Aldridge's style is entertaining, his judgments are uncommonly harsh.

All Philip Roth can do is "talk, talk, talk. . . . What he is really up to is — to use his own phrase — a form of literary onanism." Thomas Pynchon gets low marks for trying to "make the laws of chemistry and physics into plausible substitutes for human law." And William Styron is dismissed as a literary mountebank. His problem, writes Mr. Aldridge, "is not so much that he is unable to express his ideas through his fiction as that he seems not to have ideas to express."

Only Norman Mailer and Saul

Bellow earn Mr. Aldridge's unreserved respect, chiefly because both have remained loyal to reality despite a society that in Mr. Aldridge's view has grown increasingly hard to depict in any but a fantastical manner.

Mr. Aldridge's quarrel with our times seems part philosophical, part political. Never a fan of the 1960's, he now believes "We have, in fact, progressed about as far along the way as seems humanly possible toward the egalitarian society that was a central dream of the sixties and that is now well past the verge of becoming a dreary but altogether sacrosanct reality."

The new egalitarianism, he notes, has elevated "two quite mediocre men" to the Presidency, "one a redneck peanut farmer from Georgia . . . the other a former minor movie actor and jellybean addict." But here Mr. Aldridge too con-

veniently ignores our past. What of Millard Fillmore and Warren G. Harding, for instance? Surely mediocrity in neither our leaders nor our novelists can be considered a fresh phenomenon.
