

# Bette

## Book captures her bizarre humor

By MARK MURRELL  
Staff Writer

Bette Midler

*A View From a Broad*

If you're the type that is willing to be entertained by a turquoise-sequin mermaid in a starfish bra, Bette Midler's *A View From a Broad* may be a good book for your coffee table.

The Divine Miss M has finally entered the literary world, and though her first volume will never be discussed in ivied halls, it is an excellent example of bizarre humor.

The flamboyant Bette takes us with her on a world tour and intersperses her travelogue with some biographical information and absolute insanity.

The result is a book that is hysterically funny, but one not meant to be read like a novel. This is a volume you'll pick up to cheer up, provided you have a mind that can deal with the Divine's sense of humor.

Sean Russell's photographs are also a brilliant addition to our descent into the maelstrom of Midler's mind of nonconformity.

Midler has always been able to bank on the absurdity of life and make it pay off.

Her life, music, personality and outlook all have the same attractive quality. They're abnormal.

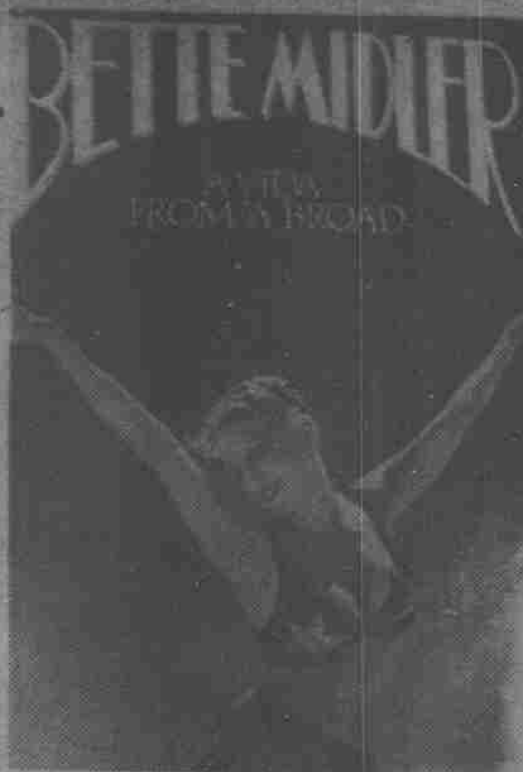
Bette is only one person, but myriads of characters live inside her. Take Delores DeLago for instance. She is a sequined mermaid that appears onstage in a wheelchair. Then there's the optimistic Magic Lady that Midler modeled after a shopping-bag woman that used to live on her stoop in Manhattan. Midler tells about all of these show characters that are an integral part of her.

### Books

Unconventional, you say? Well, who else would open a show at the London Palladium dressed as a hot dog and shaking her buns to a tune from the '30s.

Though we are taken from London to Sweden, Germany, France and Australia, Bette's narration does not have much unity. It relies on those priceless one-liners and word plays to give it that unique brand of Midler humor.

The height of this book is Midler's concert monologues. "I'm just crazy about royalty, especially queens," she said to her London audience. "I only have one question to ask Her Maj: 'What have you got in that handbag?'"



Midler tells of her childhood in Hawaii and how she has started embellishing her accounts with "cockfights, Tong Wars, furious fire goddesses and volcanic eruptions" just to fulfill the expectations of the press.

She admits being sensitive over the press's constant attention to the beginning of her career in a Turkish bath for homosexuals in Manhattan. She says it is something she can't escape, but an experience she nonetheless enjoyed.

After reading this book, one finds there are few things that Bette Midler does not enjoy. She is filled with an enviable zest for life. She can take the bad with the good and write it all off as absurdity.

Her epilogue to the book sums up her philosophy: "You know, I wanted so to leave you with the memory of the good beneath the gaudy, the saint beneath the paint, the pure little soul that lurks beneath this lurid exterior...but then again I figured: Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke!"

# 'Wonka' author's newest is imaginative, hilarious

By MELANIE SILL  
Staff Writer

Roald Dahl

*My Uncle Oswald*

Roald Dahl started thinking about the potential of sperm banks long before national headlines alerted most Americans of their existence.

The author of *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* put his active imagination to work on the concept.

The product was Dahl's latest book, *My Uncle Oswald*. Released in April, the novel is a humorous, imaginative and often bawdy look at what could happen if sperm banks were used in some rather colorful ways.

Dahl doesn't start *Oswald* with the invention of sperm banks in the 20th Century. Instead, he creates the character of Oswald Cornelius, an ambitious, rather callous youth out to make a fortune in the early 1900s.

Dahl uses two first-person narrators. The story is introduced by Oswald's nephew, who is "releasing" the text of his uncle's diary.

Oswald's first-person narrative through the diary, helps Dahl create a character without using third-person description. Oswald's quirks and personality are revealed to the reader solely through his own narrative—a method useful in storytelling which makes for light, quick reading and lots of action.

It's soon apparent that Oswald is ambitious to the point of fault, inconsiderate, selfish and a blatant abuser of women. Females, to Oswald, simply are means of physical entertainment.

The youth's adventures begin when he is told of an insect called the Blister Beetle, found in the Sudan, which is something like the famed "Spanish Fly," but a heck of a lot more powerful.

And it works for men as well as women. Oswald travels to the Sudan, picks up a hefty supply of the aphrodisia beetle, makes a bunch of little pills and sells them to wealthy men and women. Suddenly, he's rich.

But this isn't enough for Oswald. He visits A. J. Woresley, a former chemistry teacher at Cambridge, and finds out that Woresley has invented a way to deep-freeze sperm.

*My Uncle Oswald's* main flaw emerges here. The plot, though well-spiced with light, funny dialogue, is a bit thin at times and unwinds fairly predictably.

Oswald launches a plan to get the sperm of all the royalty of Europe: Albert Einstein, Picasso, Renoir, Sigmund Freud and other geniuses of the time.

Used as bait is a lovely biology student Oswald has discovered at a local women's college.

### Books

The story goes on, even becoming a bit tiresome as Dahl relates the exploits of Oswald and his partner, Yasmin Howcomely, in seducing and getting samples from all these intellectual and artistic greats.

What saves the book is Dahl's light but steady touch and imaginative dialogue. And the character of Oswald, though obnoxiously self-confident and somewhat of an intellectual snob, kind of grows on the reader by the end of the book.

Dahl's skill as a story teller and fantasy-weaver, revealed at its best in *Chocolate Factory*, is apparent throughout *Oswald*. His descriptions of the artists Yasmin seduces, for example, are usually funny and sometimes memorable.

The novel ends with a slightly, but only slightly, surprising twist; when Yasmin and the aging A. J. Woresley get married, abscond with the frozen sperm collection and become enormously wealthy.

Oswald, meanwhile, goes back to his beetle-bill business and gets rich, too.

### Movie criticism

# Kael's book lacks usual acidity

By TOM MOORE  
Staff Writer

Pauline Kael

*When The Lights Go Down*

At a press conference I attended a few months ago a movie producer was asked what he thought about film criticism. He launched on a long vicious attack on Pauline Kael. The producer made the standard criticisms about Kael's reviews in *The New Yorker*.

He argued that Kael writes film criticism only to promote her own personality. He said that Kael, who had recently taken a job with a film production company (she's now returned to *The New Yorker*, became a film critic simply to get what she really wanted—a job making movies. And he listed some of the really great films Kael has criticized—such masterpieces as *The Sound of Music* and *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*.

"How can you enjoy a movie if every joke is told twice, and the audience only laughs the second time," Kael asked. "There are funny things in *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, but after a while I was gripping the arms of my chair to stay awake. I can't believe people don't get the joke the first time: it must be that they're so eager to laugh they're softened and give in on the repeat. Peter Sellers, the star of this picture once said, 'Write any character you have in mind and I'll shape myself to what you have written. But don't write a part for me.' Yet that's what the director, Blake Edwards, and his co-writer Frank Waldman, have done. They've written a part derived from Seller's last Police Inspector Clouseau—in *The Return of the Pink Panther*, of 1975, his third tour of duty—so he is required to imitate himself, and his fish-eyed deadpan is joyless as he flogs the same old plummy-vowel sounds. Clouseau's clenched-jaws politesse is a joke that has run its course."

The passage is bitchy, know-it-all, and

self-righteous. So much so that it could easily upset Sellers and Clouseau fans and cause them not to see the point. But it gets at what's wrong with the film—that the stale repetition of gags keep *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* from being really funny.

The producer cited *The Sound of Music*, *Midnight Express* and *The Exorcist* as evidence that the infamous critic's taste in films is off-key. All of which proved to him that Pauline Kael is an ambitious bitch who really doesn't like the movies.

### Books

This same narrow-minded view is at the center of the Kael feud that is going on in the New York literary circles now. Andrew Sarris in *The Village Voice* and Renata Adler in *The New York Review of Books* both recently have set out to trash Kael's reputation once and for all in their reviews of the wicked one's latest book, *When The Lights Go Down*, a collection of film reviews that originally appeared in *The New Yorker* from 1975 to 1979.

Adler, who wrote film reviews for *The New Yorker* during Kael's absence, calls the criticism in the book "piece by piece, line by line, and without interruption, worthless."

Hmmmm. Quite a bit of biased hyperbole I'd say. Kael is probably the most insightful movie critic writing today. But she writes with such a gutsy, know-it-all, self-righteous bitchiness that it tends to rouse the base emotions in her readers. A movie has to be damn good to please Kael. She's able to cut through the cliches of plot and character when looking at a film and gets quite irked when things in a film aren't what they could be. She's at her most perceptive when writing about a film that she doesn't like too much.

Kael is less credible when writing about films she really likes. Hyperbole, which mars most film criticism, takes over.

"*Invasion of The Body Snatchers* is more sheer fun than any movie I've seen since *Carrie* and *Jaws* and maybe parts of *The Spy Who Loved Me*. The scriptwriter, W.D. (Rick) Richter, supplies some of the funniest lines ever heard from the screen, and the director, Phil Kaufman, provides such confident professionalism that you sit back in the assurance that every spooky nuance you're catching is just what was intended. It's a wonderful relief to see a movie made by people who know what they're doing."

Here, Kael can't really come up with the right words to describe what she likes on the screen the way she can when writing about something she doesn't like. But that's a problem that's common to film criticism. And the hyperbole that Kael tends to wax on films she adores isn't nearly as moronic as the hyperbole that critics like Rex Reed and Gene Shalit gush forth with when they like something. Through Kael's hyperbole a bit of insight is visible.

On the whole, the writing in *When The Lights Go Down* seems calmer and a bit duller than any of Kael's previous books. She doesn't get as mad about things as she used to. No longer does she use her space to belittle other reviewers' opinions of films. And she seems to like more movies and to have less harsh things to say about them. It's hard to imagine the Kael of ten years ago liking *Up In Smoke*, *Close Encounters Of The*

*Third Kind* or *The Warriors*, as she does now.

If the pieces in *When The Lights Go Down* seem to lack the zeal of Kael's earlier work, it's not that Kael's mellowed so much that the films she reviewed from 1975 through 1979 weren't exactly made in film's heyday. Few films were so good or so terrible that they might provoke a strong reaction. But Kael covers the period better than anyone else, despite what Renata Alder and Andrew Sarris have to say.

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