

Dick, Jane & Life in America

By ELLIOTT SHIFF

In today's hifalutin world of semiotics and post-structuralism it's encouraging to see a book that probes the depths of society without using words longer than two syllables. Marc Gallant's *Fun With Dick and Jane* consists of a series of 22 enlightening vignettes which bring Dick, Jane, and Sally into the '80s with a vengeance.

When we last left the trio they were North America's role models for young people growing up in the world of white picket fences and milkmen.

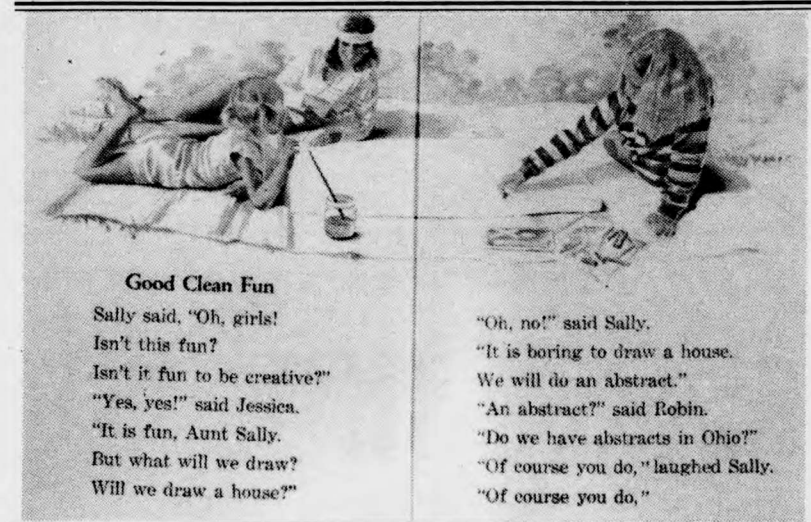
Dick, the hero of the family, is now an aspirin munching father, who helps his kids fly kites and drives the family around in a K-car. Jane is an up and coming divorcee who divides her time between the cuisinart and Amway. Sally, now living on the West Coast, is a twice divorced modern day Helen of Troy who has left the sleepy world of Dayton far behind.

Not all of the original characters have survived the last 20 years. Puff the cat, grandfather, and Zeke, the man who was always raking leaves, are six feet under. Grandmother is still alive and kicking, living in a retirement home just outside of Dayton, where she spends the majority of her time bowling and leading tours to the Holy Land.

Gallant wears his influences on his sleeve as the short, punctual sentences are clearly Hemingwayesque in nature. Some scenes are only one page long with no more than three sentences to a page. A typical example is the return to the farm sequence. Taking a page out of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, Dick hustles his family into the K-car to go search out their roots only to find that the farm has been transformed into a Pharmaceuticals factory. The pathos is clear. Heavy scenes of this nature however are cleverly balanced with lighter ones such as the scene where the newly reincarnated Spot is taken for a walk, while Dick trails faithfully behind, Pooper-Scooper in hand.

Although the section devoted to Jane generally drags it is important to stick through this part of the story in order to fully comprehend the social impact of this book. Despite the fact that she has been dealt a tough lot in life Jane still believes in the American dream. When Jane relates to Jessica how she sells Amway products it is downright inspirational. (I almost broke down crying at this point.)

The story picks up as the reader is whisked to the West Coast to be reunited with Sally. Sally is no longer the drooling baby crawling along the rug. In fact it is the reader who is moved to drooling as Sally is revealed as a hot-to-trot twice divorced sexpot, dressed in snug fit-



Good Clean Fun

Sally said, "Oh, girls! Isn't this fun? Isn't it fun to be creative?"
"Yes, yes!" said Jessica.
"It is fun, Aunt Sally. But what will we draw? Will we draw a house?"

"Oh, no!" said Sally.
"It is boring to draw a house. We will do an abstract."
"An abstract?" said Robin.
"Do we have abstracts in Ohio?"
"Of course you do," laughed Sally.
"Of course you do."

In the confusing world of Macintosh computers and allusions to Mr. T, the story still preaches down-home values, as Dick's wife Susan brings their thirsty children some red kool-aid, something readers of all ages can relate to. It is timeless scenes such as this that will grant this book instant immortality.

While everything seems to be coming up roses for Dick, his sister Jane has had a significantly rougher ride down the turnpike of life. While she is not openly bitter about her failed marriage there is a distinct look of tension on Jane's face as she stands by the cuisinart, measuring-cup in hand. Her youngest daughter Jessica is already at the rebellious stage, dressing up as a punker complete with green hair.

ting leotards which she stretches to the limit in every conceivable direction.

The scene moves from aerobics to weight lifting but one thing remains constant—Sally has clearly been around the track a few times, in every sense of the term. Sally however is not all cheesecake, as Gallant once again dips into the well of allusion, blatantly characterizing her along the lines of Diotima of Mantinea, Plato's daemon in *The Symposium*. This heavy handed plagiarism is acceptable only for the simple reason that it allows the plot to take a somewhat bizarre turn. Jane's daughters, who are visiting Sally, are encouraged to draw abstract paintings as opposed to the concrete "house" which they are used to constructing back home in Dayton.

Alas, Sally is a well rounded woman, and following her enlightening drawing session with the girls she

slips into a bare back dress for one of her suitors, a slick dude named Craig, who brings her a flowering cactus. Craig is unabashedly straight forward, evoking every tiresome compliment imaginable Sally's way. He even cries out, "You are such a gourmet." Fortunately Gallant uses better judgment, sparing the reader the inevitable closing page of this scene where the unrequited Craig limps back to his car after a frustrating evening at Sally's.

Although the story ends rather abruptly, the reader is left with a distinct "feel good" attitude. The unfortunate Craig is left behind quickly as the scene switches to Sally's party, a mixture of networking and fun. For those who criticized the early Dick and Jane books because of the lack of racial representation, your fears will be assuaged. At Sally's party we meet Winston, Sally's black broker, Hisako, her oriental friend from EST, and Daryl, her dandified accountant who glances knowingly at young girls. In two pages, Gallant has made up for 50 years of white middle-class stereotypes, while creating new ones almost instantly.

While one may feel suddenly cut off at the end of the story it certainly leaves an open option for future adventures of Dick, Jane and Sally. Perhaps next time we meet up with them it will be Dick and Jane in Space. But until then treasure your copy of *More Fun With Dick and Jane*. It will rest comfortably in your bookcase next to Sartre and Tolstoy.



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