

Review of reviews: Books

*What the critics said about
the best new books*

Book of the week

On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense

by David Brooks
(Simon & Schuster, \$25)

We Americans are not as shallow as we seem, says David Brooks. Wandering the multiple manifestations of our species' preferred suburban habitat, you might conclude otherwise. In the lush inner rings of suburbia, evenings among friends rarely go by without a lengthy disquisition on "the merits and demerits of Corian countertops." Further out, in the land of split-levels and cul-de-sacs, dads spend their weekends "conquest shopping" for the perfect gas-burning barbecue grill, while moms sate themselves on bulk procurements of Tater Tots and toilet paper rolls. Vulgar though our everyday aspirations may be, says Brooks, that impulse to create more blissful tomorrows is the engine of America's unique greatness.

Brooks is "every liberal's favorite conservative," said Michael Kinsley in *The New York Times*. Recently hired by the *Times* as a regular columnist, Brooks has an undeniable flair for wisecracking social anthropology, as he proved in his previous book, *Bobos in Paradise*. His latest is another "bravura performance"; it slices and dices America into various spoofable subcultures, then shows how our differences can be seen as manifestations of a deeper similarity. Unfortunately, there's "a difference between sociology and shtick," and Brooks' overall argument doesn't hold water. Essentially, he has mastered the art of "stereotype peddling," said Sasha Issenberg in *Philadelphia*. Coastal elites use him as a guide to flyover country, but contrary to his riffs, books are popular with red-state Americans, Nascar is popu-



lar in "blue America," and it's not hard at all to spend at least \$20 on a dinner at Red Lobster. Could it be that his insights are all lifted from a 1989 Jeff Foxworthy stand-up routine?

When Brooks ventures into "exurbia," that land of free-floating new population centers, his descriptions are at least "modestly fresh," said Bill Beuttler in *The Boston Globe*. But his attempt at delineating a universal American mind-set has

been done better "many times over" by other writers. Brooks is apparently "just catching up" now with the standard American studies curriculum of the past 40 years, said Dan Cryer in *Newsday*. Say this for *On Paradise Drive*: "It's never boring." But Brooks had given us reason to hope for more.

Hypner-what?: Bookish chums strike gold

Maybe a solid liberal arts education is worth something after all, said Karen Sandstrom in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. This week, two "ridiculously bright" recent Ivy League graduates hit the best-seller lists with a complex thriller that revolves around an almost indecipherable 1499 book that one of the pals came across as an undergraduate. A copy of *The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* sits in Princeton's rare books library. Written in six languages and stitched through with hieroglyphics and encoded secrets, it "has long stumped scholars on many fronts," beginning with the identity of its author. That such a "dowdy" academic mystery can wear "the tube top of popular fiction" is a measure of what Dan Brown's hit novel *The Da Vinci Code* has done for this country. It has reaffirmed that America can still be a "land of plenty" for the "overly educated."



Caldwell and Thomason

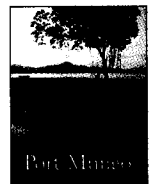
Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason didn't write *The Rule of Four* overnight, said Linton Weeks in *The Washington Post*. The summer after their 1998 graduations from Princeton and Harvard, the two childhood pals "set up computers, side by side, in Caldwell's basement" and worked full tilt for three months. To their surprise, that

wasn't enough. With Thomason off to medical school and Caldwell briefly hitched to a Virginia dot-com, they had to pour innumerable spare moments and late-night phone arguments into the project before, in early 2001, they finally felt that they had a presentable manuscript. Two and a half years of revisions later, a New York publisher agreed.

The finished novel is "as much a blazingly good yarn as it is an exceptional piece of scholarship," said David Lazarus in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The book features a Princeton undergrad who's on the verge of cracking the *Hypnerotomachia*'s secrets, and the surprise touch is "an emotionally satisfying coming-of-age element" that delves into a father-son relationship, strong friendships, and a romance. Caldwell and Thomason have invented 15th-century secrets rather than actually resolve all the mysteries behind the strange 15th-century text that has been called "the most beautiful book in the world," said Dinitia Smith in *The New York Times*. If you want to give the riddle a go yourself, here's some good news: *The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* was fully translated for the first time just five years ago, and the language it was translated into was English.

Novel of the week

Port Mungo by Patrick McGrath (Knopf, \$24)



A lifelong quest for the primitive leaves two painters with a shattered marriage and the memory of a teenage daughter lying dead in a Honduras swamp. The story of Jack Rathbone and his alcoholic older siren is recounted by another in Patrick McGrath's growing "gallery of unreliable narrators," said Jessica Winter in *The Village Voice*. In this case, our guide is Jack's adoring sister, whose cluelessness about what really happened in the fictitious Port Mungo simulates "the delectable frustration of pressing an ear to a closed door." "Novels this disturbing should carry a health warning," said Liz Jensen in the *London Independent*. *Port Mungo* is "a work of utter brilliance," but I finished it feeling "queasy," "haunted," and "polluted." In five previous "Gothic-tinged" novels, McGrath has employed many of the same devices, said Christopher Benfrey in *The New York Times*. Never, though, has he created as "consistently entertaining" a narrator, and never has the shifting ground we traverse with McGrath been "more intricately bound up in the larger questions" he's raising. Then again, you may finish *Port Mungo* wondering if the novel is merely a "cunningly contrived" entertainment.