

orizes that her “startling metamorphosis,” after the revelation of language at the well pump, from violent little savage to avid student and “angel child” flowed from the recognition that compliance and sweetness were the way to win protection from the vast world of “seeing, hearing people.” Yet hostility toward Teacher surfaced in her dreams, and hostility toward the status quo in her radical politics. Though she no longer hit and pinched members of her family, she championed the Wobblies, the Russian Revolution, Margaret Sanger’s campaign for birth control, and the N.A.A.C.P. “Ever since childhood,” she announced, “my feelings have been with the slaves.” Her outspoken liberalism affronted her mother, irritated Annie, and piqued her rich benefactors, but helped create, it may be, the general public’s love of her, and her aura of sainthood. Her cosmic optimism added to her radiance, and this radiance furthered her acceptance and self-preservation among the seeing.

As evidence of the spell she cast, her books remain, some of them still in print. Helen’s years at Radcliffe, ending in her graduation cum laude in 1904, were a heroic ordeal for both her and Teacher: Annie had to spell out every lecture into the student’s palm, and for hours a day had to comprehend and translate written material—German, French, history, geometry, physics, philosophy—well beyond the limits of her own education. Her fragile eyes, injured by trachoma in her girlhood, failed to the point that she “could not see much farther than the end of her nose.” Most of the course matter did not exist in Braille, little in the way of companionship could be coaxed from the other students, and of the rather crusty and distant professors only one, William Allan Neilson, “took the time to master the manual finger language so he could communicate directly with her.” Another warm spot in the faculty was Charles Townsend Copeland, who encouraged Helen in English composition. He wrote, “In some of her work she has shown that she can write better than any pupil I have ever had, man or woman. She has an excellent ‘ear’ for the flow of sentences.” Her written work, though a bit flowery and lofty for modern tastes, does have a lively, engaging, intricately modulated voice, whereas she herself—to her grief—could never come close to talking like other people. Speech and writing are different dialects of a language.

Helen’s themes for Copeland came to the attention of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which paid her three thousand dollars for the series of articles that became her first book, “The Story of My Life” (1903). She had learned to touch-type, yet, even so, found writing such a burden that Annie had to remind her sternly, “The game of words is the only game you can play on equal terms with the best of them.” Annie, as her letters show, wrote very well, as did John Macy; these two certainly exercised a shaping hand on Keller’s early articles and books. But the spirit and content are Helen’s. Her sensory limitations compel her to contemplate the topics of perception and consciousness that have perennially concerned philosophers. In “The World I Live In” she writes of how Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” persuaded her of her own existence, and of how the “horizon” of odor, the far limit of a scent, gave her the idea of distance which the more fortunate easily gather from sight and sound. With a hard-earned Emersonianism she writes, “Sometimes it seems as if the very substance of my flesh were so many eyes looking out at will upon a world new created every day.” With wry Emersonian self-regard she proclaims, “I am burdened with a Puritanical sense of obligation to set the world to rights.” Her desperate need to break out of her maddening prison gives her prose a shine of triumph, a giddy honesty. Her story, more than any told before or since, came to represent the pathos and promise of the sensorially deprived. Van Wyck Brooks’s biographical sketch of Keller, in 1956, mentions a haunting detail that most biographers omit. Before Helen’s “soul was set free” by her realizing the connection between the spelled-out “w-a-t-e-r” on her hand and the silvery, gushing reality of pump water, Annie had tapped out the word “d-o-l-l.” The child had failed to grasp the connection between these taps and the doll she held but memorized the pattern of finger motions and tried them out on her old pet setter, Belle, hitherto her most understanding companion. Then the light dawned, and “I understood that it was possible for me to communicate with other people by these signs. Thoughts that ran forward and backward came to me quickly,—thoughts that seemed to start in my brain and spread all over me. . . . I felt joyous, strong, equal to my limitations.” ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

THIS IS MY DAUGHTER, by Roxana Robinson (Random House; \$25). Nervy Emma is married to icky Warren; handsome Peter is married to posh Caroline. When these pairs founder and Emma weds Peter, each brings to the union a furious ex-spouse and a peeved, baffled daughter. Tribulation ensues, played out on the leafy side streets off Park Avenue, at Lutèce, at Nightingale, and on the tennis court. Almost no one—surprise!—acquits himself well, but the novel escapes being left at the beach house by how deeply Robinson is able to etch the constrictions of Emma’s narrow heart.

THE FALL OF A SPARROW, by Robert Hellen-ga (Scribners; \$25). This seems to be about a middle-aged Midwestern professor screwing up an exemplary life. He lets his cherished wife leave him because of a dispute over their daughter’s gravestone; he has a scandalous affair with one of his students; and, neglecting his younger daughters, he goes off to Bologna to cover the trial of the neo-Fascists who blew up his eldest daughter years before. Like the author, however, he keeps pulling rabbits out of hats, and when you cry at the end you won’t be sure if your tears are of joy or of sorrow.

TAKEN IN, by Beverly Coyle (Viking; \$24.95).

In Coyle’s wrenching third novel, the mostly ordinary Robb family is bedevilled by its own intentions: when their idealistic son, Matt, becomes embroiled with a young prostitute, good works lead to horrific events. It is Gretchen, the fifteen-year-old daughter, who shepherds the family toward redemption. Like Alice Hoffman, Coyle knows teen-agers, but she also knows how to handle happenstance and calamity—as though the gods themselves were fifteen-year-olds.

LEAVING SMALL’S HOTEL, by Eric Kraft (Picador; \$23). A wonderful *matryoshka* of a novel, with at least five stories nested one inside the other: novel, satire, memoir, radio play, murder mystery. In the central tale, Peter Leroy, assistant innkeeper, treats his guests to nightly readings about his crackpot boyhood business ventures (the Magnetomic Flying-Saucer Detector!). As he and his wife, Albertine, desperately try to unload this albatross of a property, the various tales move toward contrasting climaxes with just the sort of spectacular intricacy that makes a business fail and a novel fly.

CITIES OF THE PLAIN, by Cormac McCarthy (Knopf; \$24). This tragic last volume of the Border Trilogy sees the American West enter the modern world, as the cowboy John Grady Cole looks down from a rock bluff at the city lights “strewn across the desert floor like a tiara laid out upon a jeweler’s blackcloth.” McCarthy’s language carries a brooding, evolutionary sense of time and labor—in his hands the changing of a tire on an old truck becomes a mythic deed. The weight of history rests on the shoulders of John Grady, too, and he’s doomed to learn that “when things are gone they’re gone. They aint comin back.”