

BOOKS

BURGER DELUXE

The benefits of conspicuous consumption are conspicuously overlooked

BY SANDRA TSING LOH

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Can the future of our planet be glimpsed in a line of overweight midwestern tourists in Nike caps in Las Vegas, gawking at a Harley-Davidson Café next to a fake Eiffel Tower next to a fake Egyptian pyramid, while all around Disneyesque jets of water sway to the croonings of Celine Dion? If you think the answer is yes, and this Oktoberfest of consumerism depresses you ... look in the mirror! Do you see a *New York Times* subscription? Do you see Italian loafers? Do you see a bottle of \$18 Chardonnay (or, more darkly, some trappy varietal you hate to admit is Australian, and six bucks)? Just having the luxury of time to sadly ponder the collapse of civilization suggests you're a member of a demographic PRIZM (Potential Rating Index for Zip Markets) cluster such as "Money and Brains" or "Furs and Station Wagons" (more likely to consume natural cold cereal, pumpernickel bread, the BMW 5-series), as much defined by your purchases as, say, "Old-Old," "Levittown U.S.A.," or "Shotguns and Pickups" (this last more likely to consume chain

saws, snuff, frozen potato products, whipped toppings).

Never mind how exquisitely discerning we think we are. In twenty-first-century America our stories have become one and the same: we work to consume, we live to consume, we are what we consume. And not just that; according to a recent spate of appalling—

TRADING UP
The New American Luxury
by Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske
Portfolio

LIVING IT UP
America's Love Affair With Luxury
by James B. Twitchell
Simon & Schuster

yet intriguing—new books in what one reviewer has called "the growing field of luxe lit," it seems we're all starting to consume the same things. The melting pot is becoming a fondue, as increasing numbers of Americans hurl their hard-earned dollars at such unnecessarys as lattes, gourmet chocolate, Napa wine, massage, lingerie, designer wear, and Mercedes coupes. No longer just for super-rich blue bloods, the "luxury" experience has become thoroughly middle-class, even prole (two words: "Cucci T-shirt"). But is this good news or bad news?

In the view of Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske, the authors of the depressingly hilarious and hilariously depressing *Trading Up*, it is good news.

Particularly if you're the CEO of Bath & Body Works, which Fiske is, or the head of Victoria's Secret ("a \$3.5 billion multichannel brand"), as is the book's preface writer. Also apparently not hurting, according to this euphoric business text, are the makers of such meteoric "New Luxury" hits as Sub-Zero refrigerators, Viking ranges, Kendall-Jackson wines, Belvedere vodka, Sam Adams lager, and Callaway golf clubs—and, since we're making lists, Starbucks, BMW, Williams-Sonoma, Panera Bread, Coach, and the Cheesecake Factory, all specialty businesses that actually, incredibly, grew during the 2001–2002 downturn.

The question for entrepreneurs—at whom this book, with its admirable sangfroid, is aimed—is: Why do some New Luxury products explode, while others belly-flop harder than a plunging Cadillac Cimarron? The answer: emotional engagement. It's not enough to trick out what's basically a Chevy, as Old Luxury dinosaur Cadillac infamously did with the Cimarron, and hope that folks will buy it for sentimental and/or vaguely musty status reasons. According to the authors, New Luxury consumers seek actual technical superiority, or at least a perception of such, and fulfillment in four specific "emotional spaces": "Taking Care of Me," "Connecting," "Questing," and "Individual Style." Example:

BMW owners wash their cars more frequently than owners of other cars do. They park them on the street and then turn back to gaze lovingly at them as they walk away. They say that the first sight of their BMW in the airport parking lot is like a warm welcome home.

The stinging comparison: "It's a rare Taurus driver who can be found gazing fondly at his parked car."

And how is all this vigorous trading up from Taurus to BMW possible? Happily for New Luxury marketers, Americans are working more hours than ever, have more disposable income, and have less time to spend it in; and the family has collapsed. (Startling statistic, delivered without comment: "In 1996, the lifetime probability of being divorced for a twenty-five-year-old was 52 percent.") Hence typical New Luxury consumers

THOMAS HOEFNER/MAGNUM PHOTOS

are “lonely, fearful, stressed, and longing for peace, but they are also hopeful, optimistic, and eager to try new things.” As *The Wall Street Journal*, quoted by Silverstein and Fiske, suggested, they are today’s frozen-faced Willy Lomans: “growing numbers of salesmen and lawyers, bankers and stockbrokers are fixing their facial expressions with Botox.” They are our Eukanuba-hoarding singletons: in many of America’s 35 million non-family households “pets have become the new children,” in that 83 percent of pet owners call themselves “Mommy” or “Daddy” when talking to their pets (up from 55 percent in 1995), and almost two thirds celebrate their pets’ birthdays. They are angry divorcees sullenly queuing at the Cheesecake Factory. They account for the astonishing sales of Viking ranges, 75 percent of which are never used.

Now that we’re thoroughly depressed, it’s time to slosh out a mug of Belvedere (\$28 a bottle) and turn to James B. Twitchell’s more sardonic but in an odd way more reassuring *Living It Up*. A professor at the University of Florida, Twitchell has the decency to be repulsed by America’s Hogarthian orgy of frivolous consumption. But he’s leery of this repulsion—his repulsion, our repulsion ... and theirs. By “theirs” I mean that of such killjoys as Thorstein Veblen (who coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption” in his 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class*), Juliet Schor (*The Overspent American*, 1998), and John Kenneth Galbraith (*The Affluent Society*, 1958). After all, Twitchell juicily reports,

John Kenneth Galbraith spends the summer just to the south of me in Vermont. He has a huge spread and a beautiful house, nice stone fences, ancient oaks ... takes jet planes to Switzerland to his digs in Gstaad, great skiing.

See? With a Galbraith “it’s okay to buy a Steinway baby grand, take a trip to the south of France to attend a kaffeeklatch on the plight of the Etruscans, or send your kid to Harvard at 30K a year,” but God forbid you throw craps at Caesar’s Palace. In short, for cloistered academics “luxury has become a mallet with which one pounds the taste of others.”

To consider “luxury” always a bad thing, Twitchell argues, is simply to ignore history.

Almost without fail, one generation’s indulgence becomes the next generation’s necessity. Think buttons, window glass, rugs, fermented juice, the color purple, door handles, lace, enamel, candles, pillows, mirrors, combs, umbrellas.

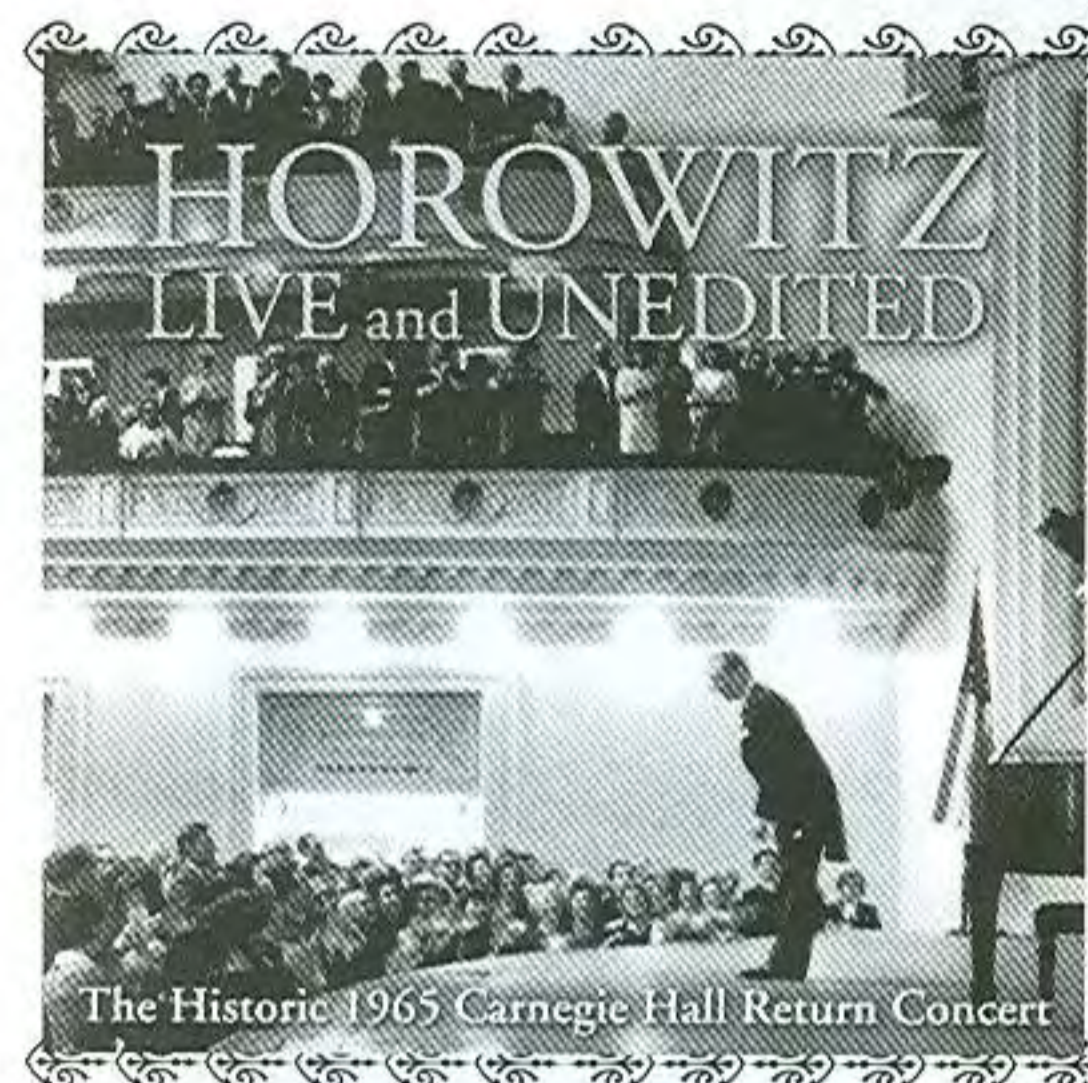
Nail clippers and shorts and socks were once a luxury, and don’t forget the least frivolous “indulgence” of all: indoor plumbing. In a way, the rich provide society with a valuable service, because they pay the “high first costs” of emerging technology. “Sure, the ‘upfronters’ get HDTV, digital cameras, laser eye surgery, Palm Pilots ... They also get first crack at Edsels, the Betamax, eight-track stereo, and Corfam shoes.”

Which is not to say the purveyors of modern luxury have anything like the common good in mind. At the nucleus of today’s dark, pulsing luxe star are scary international conglomerates—for instance, France’s LVMH Moët Hennessy–Louis Vuitton—that franchise “luxury” in chain boutiques from Miami Beach to Rodeo Drive and are “every bit as rapacious as Philip Morris and every bit as sophisticated as the Church of Rome.” Pulling us in on a perfume-strip conveyor belt are the Condé Nast magazines, whose ads—particularly *Vanity Fair*’s—Twitchell uproariously deconstructs (“The frigid vampire women of Versace wait for dinner”). And yet, paging through the glossy parade of Hermès ties, Martex sheets, and Patek Philippe watches, Twitchell reminds us that human beings have always fetishized objects: the seventeenth-century Dutch had tulips; Stendhal had the pulse-pounding frescoes of Giotto; Daisy Buchanan had Gatsby’s shirts; the Vatican ... well, the Vatican put everything under glass, from the knucklebones of saints to ruby-encrusted miters.

Indeed:

The use of luxury is close to the use of sacred objects, namely, a way to make distinctions not just between and among other objects but between parts of experience. Consuming tells you not just who you are but *where* you are ... In church the sacred objects are used to punctuate the times of day. Certain objects are part

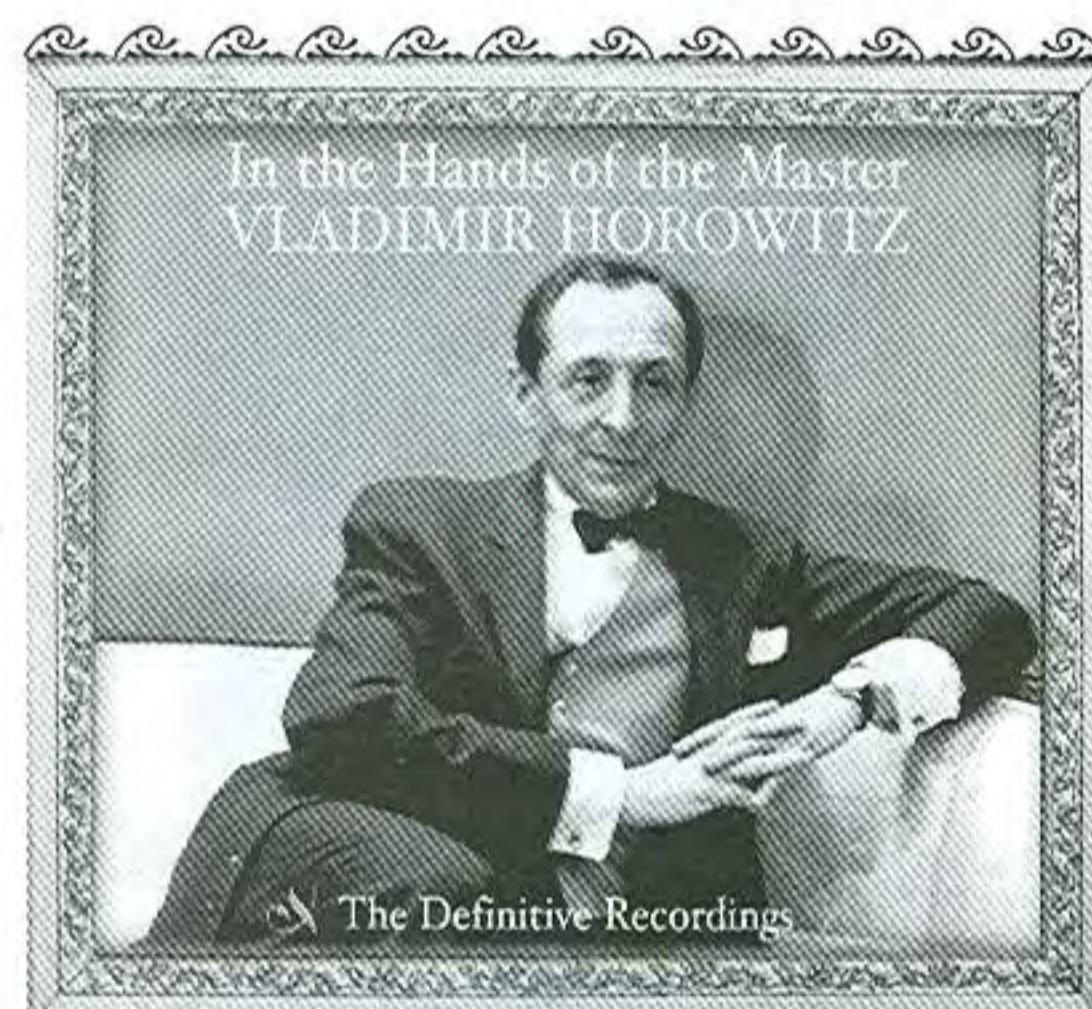
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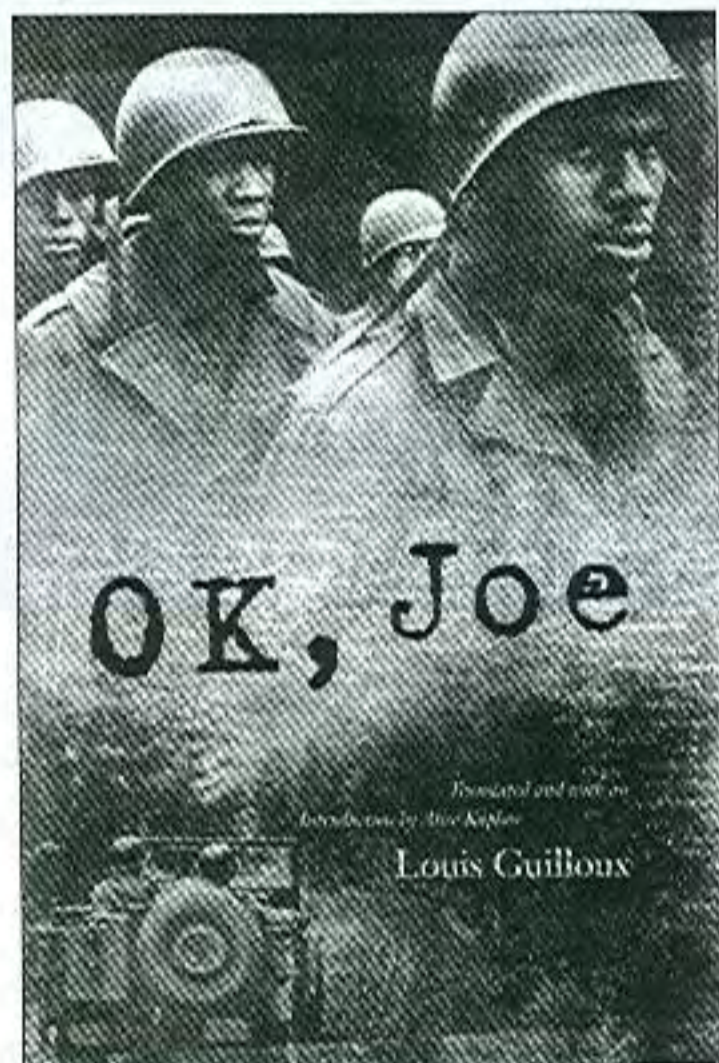
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of morning prayers ... midday meals ... evening vespers. Ditto the objects of human maturation. Take cars ... You get a used jalopy at sixteen, a sports car at twenty-two, a sedan at marriage, a stationwagon with kids, an SUV for midlife independence, a Porsche for midlife crisis, then the Lincoln Town Car ...

And

"Am I ready for the Chevy Suburban?" asks the modern Prufrock, not "Do I want kids?"

In short: "Materialism is not the opposite of spiritualism. Materialism is what you spiritualize when you have plenty of stuff." Those who don't have the stuff must construct instead a fully furnished heaven. And so, *Living It Up*

finally argues, bemoan if you will the fact that as materialism—the shallowest of all the isms—marches across the globe, Berlin Walls crumble, imams fall, and indigenous cultures collapse. Wring your hands over the fact that golfers worldwide annually spend the equivalent of a small country's GNP. But perhaps if certain sand-trap spiritual leaders could develop a really good swing on the golf course of life, they wouldn't be questing so damn hard in the name of a positively luxe afterlife and ruining tee time for the rest of us. ▀

Sandra Tsing Loh is a writer and performer whose solo show Sugar Plum Fairy will be running at the Geffen Playhouse, in Los Angeles, in November and December. Her most recent book is A Year in Van Nuys (2001).

BOOKS

THIS BOY'S LIT

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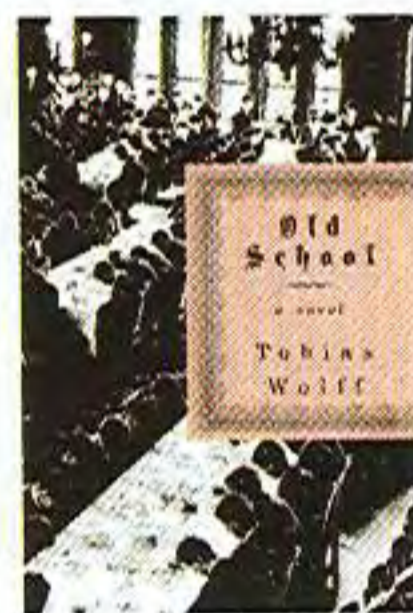
Near the end of *This Boy's Life* (1989), Tobias Wolff's memoir of childhood (and his best-known book), the adolescent hero escapes a rough home and an indifferent early-sixties public education in Washington State by the grace of a scholarship to the fancy Hill School, back east. Wolff's new volume, *Old School*, is offered as a novel, but it seems in some respects to continue the story. Readers learn, for example, of the young protagonist's hardscrabble days in Washington, and hear occasional mention of the duplicitous father they've come to know not just from *This Boy's Life* but also from work by Wolff's brother, Geoffrey (*The Duke of Deception*, 1979).

Neither Hill nor the young narrator is named this time out, but each is rendered with vivid sympathy—especially the school. A progressive headmaster is trying to nudge it toward meritocracy, banishing class consciousness in favor of literary snobbery. The masters who teach English already receive more deference than their colleagues in other disciplines, and brief visits by such beltristic eminences as Edmund Wilson

and Robert Penn Warren are occasions of great excitement on the wooded campus. "The absence of an actual girl to compete for meant that every other prize became feminized," the narrator tells us. The writing contests, whose winners get a private audience with the visiting author, are fought with special fierceness.

Wolff's hero wishes for anointing by "hands that had written living stories and poems, hands that had touched the hands of other writers." As the novel opens, in the fall of 1960, it is the wrinkled and famous palms of Robert Frost for which he and the other boys make greedy grasp. The narrator's rivals are nicely characterized by the literary styles of their submissions: George Kellogg works in traditional forms and already seems "more professor than writer," let alone student; Jeff Purcell, trying to transcend his privileged background, has "written a ballad about a miner being sent deep into the earth to perish in a cave-in while the mine owner hand-feeds filet mignon to his hunting dogs." When it comes to prose efforts, the narrator and his roommate—both of whom strain to hide the fact that their fathers are Jewish—are almost comically in debt to Hemingway.

Old School's literary joustings turn it into an offbeat commonplace book of



OLD SCHOOL
by Tobias Wolff
Knopf