

FICTION

What a Piece of Work I Am
(A Confabulation)
by Eric Kraft
(Crown; \$22)

ARIANE LODKOCHNIKOV is practically a walking sex fantasy—her nickname is Tootsie Koochikov, and she is so alluring that even her dopey brothers spy on her through chinks in the bedroom wall. But when she realizes that she is also the Babington, Long Island, town slut she sets out to remake herself. She begins at a local big-money tourist motel. Disillusioned, however, with what seemed a conventional route to at least material improvement, she moves on, finding the devotion of an elderly neighbor for his dying wife about the highest thing life can offer. Her fate is to be a modern-day Ariadne, though, which means that almost any path she tries is a dead end or loops back to where she started. That should be frustrating to the reader, but it's when we come upon new versions of what we've seen before that the novel is most droll and delighting. It conveys a sense of sheer play that a reader may not have experienced since building a fort in the back yard or setting up a dolls' tea party.

The Girls
by Elaine Kagan
(Knopf; \$23)

WAS Pete a good guy or was he really bad is the big question on the minds of five middle-aged Kansas City "girls," whose former best friend—Pete's wife, Jessie—has killed him. He slept with some of the women, who were high-school pals, during his marriage, but he also faithfully cared for the group's collective black mammy and his unhappy sister-in-law, and greatly cheered the group's star, Frances, who has a successful bicoastal acting career, and a mastectomy. The story opens skillfully, with monologues by some of the women as they tell the visiting Frances exactly what happened on the fateful day and give their perspectives on the charming, vicious dead man. The elegance of form, however, is sacrificed for the sake of all sorts of melodrama around the funeral and a final chapter narrated by the stiff. This book is just literary enough to offer the pleasures of pulp to more serious readers, and is pulpy enough, probably, for anyone.



BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED

Try
by Dennis Cooper
(Grove; \$20)

ZIGGY MCCAULEY, the smelly teenage protagonist of this bleakly funny novel, was sexually abused as a child by one of the two gay men who adopted him, and by that man's obese brother, who makes child pornography and doesn't draw the line at necrophilia. In the course of the story, Ziggy also accepts the carnal attentions of his other adoptive dad, a rock critic whose sexual tastes, as specialized as they are unsavory, are presented in a deft parody of the pretensions of pop-culture analysts. Ziggy's consolations are editing a zine (called *I Apologize*) for fellow abuse victims and adoring a young heroin addict whose quest for numbness becomes increasingly understandable to the reader as Cooper's Swiftian take on human nature becomes increasingly persuasive.

GENERAL

It All Adds Up: From the
Dim Past to the Uncertain Future
by Saul Bellow
(Viking; \$23.95)

SOME well-meaning soul apparently held a gun to Bellow's head and forced him to bring out this anthology, for Bellow himself betrays little enthusiasm about the project, contributing a title that is the verbal equivalent of a shrug and a preface more or less recommend-

ing that the book be regarded as a record of error. Why the elaborate diffidence? The pieces (the earliest is from 1948) include travel reports (from Spain, Paris, Tuscany, Vermont), addresses (the 1976 Nobel lecture), news stories (from the Six-Day War), eulogies, interviews, and reminiscences (mainly of Chicago, Bellow's home town), and are lucid, edgy, bittersweet—in short, unmistakably Bellowian. Certain pet quotations and anecdotes recur; and the intellectual world of the thirties is a stone so frequently touched that one begins to feel that very little in American life has interested Bellow since. If there is a turn reflected in the collection, it is the one that occurred around the time of "Humboldt's Gift," when a semi-Tolstoyan spiritualism seemed to seize Bellow's work. "Everything worth living for has melted away," he says in a 1993 essay; and when he writes in that vein he is both most urgent and most baffling. But he is never merely doctrinaire, and "error" seems an inappropriate category for this varied and modest bouquet.

Paul Revere's Ride
by David Hackett Fischer
(Oxford; \$27.50)

THE action in this exciting history illuminates New England's culture—especially the ways that it differed from old England's—on the eve of the American Revolution. General Thomas Gage, the British Army commander, assumed that society was run from the top down, while Paul Revere, the Boston silversmith and rebel courier, was used to a world that was organized from the bottom up. When Emerson's "embattled farmers" mustered at Lexington and Concord in response to Revere's alarm, they and their elected officers began by debating where and how their units should meet the British raid. By the night of Revere's famous ride, all of Massachusetts' self-governing institutions, and not just the militia, had become a resistance network. It was an underground that Revere had helped create and in which he had innumerable allies and helpers who, like him, were out that night giving the warning that a substantial British force was on the march. Fischer's details are meticulous, and provide an irresistible sense of immediacy as a slumbering countryside is wakened to war. ♦