

"First Lady On Trial."

Excerpts from Martin Amis's review of *It Takes a Village*, by Hillary Clinton (The Sunday Times [London], 17 March 1996):

Newt Gingrich called her a bitch. Rush Limbaugh called her a feminazi. One New York weekly called her a scumbag. William Safire, in the New York Times, called her a congenital liar. And the President himself, it is rumoured, calls her the First Liability. Rumour goes on to add that Hillary Rodham Clinton is a communist and a carpetbagger, a wowser and a fraud, a floozie and a dyke. It has been repeatedly suggested that she had an affair with her financial conspirator Vincent Foster, who died, mysteriously, in 1993. At this stage, we don't want to know whether Hillary slept with Vincent Foster. We want to know if she killed him.

America is running out of patience with its First Ladies. In recent years, Barbara Bush alone has escaped whipping; perhaps because everyone assumed, subconsciously, that she wasn't George's wife but his mother. Similarly, the pious Rosalyn Carter came a poor second to Miss Lillian, who, in old age, symbolically reclaimed her virginity. If they're not prigs, they're tramps, like that Jackie, or that Nancy. It makes you wonder why we're so soft on *our* First Ladies. Nobody ever accused Audrey Callaghan, say, of putting out for Frank Sinatra. Mrs Lincoln was the first First Lady (the phrase being coined in her honour); and maybe she was the worst First Lady (profligate, hysterical). But it should have been clear back in 1860 that First Ladydom was a terrible notion, reeking of fake precedence and popularity contests. Our baser instincts will always want to turn the First Lady into the Last Lady. And the resentment would seem to have its sexual component. What these women have in common is that they go to bed with presidents. Hillary, we may be sure, is no exception. Chelsea proves the point.

Still, Mrs Clinton is the most unpopular First Lady ever; and, more substantively, she is the first First Lady to stand before a grand jury. She is clearly the brightest and ablest of her line. And, in all senses, she is the most exposed. As the author of the failed health-care plan, Hillary assumed quasi-ministerial power while remaining unelected and unaccountable. And unsackable, it was said; though the President now seems to have kicked her upstairs. She came to Washington, with her new broom, and the institutions duly defeated and deformed her. Everything she touches turns out to have the word *gate* tacked on to the end of it: Cookiegate, Cattlegate, Travelgate, Fostergate, Whitewatergate; and now Thankyougate.

Thankyougate, or better say Nothankyougate, has to do with the book under review. Evidently, *It Takes a Village* took a village to write, and Hillary neglected to acknowledge the village elder; Barbara Feinman of the Washington Post. It appears that Hillary also sought to underpay that villager; but the facts of the dispute hardly matter. What matters is the way things can be made to look. In American politics, you go through the gates and you get to the doors: the doors of "perception".

If this book had been written by someone with a different address, then of course I wouldn't be reviewing it. And neither would anybody else. A chatty manual about raising children along voluntarist and communitarian lines, it might have got a mention in the TES, or in Pregnancy magazine. But, as the jacket copy patiently explains, Hillary Rodham Clinton is "America's First Lady", "she lives in the White House with the President and their daughter, Chelsea". Thus the book will be considered top-down rather than bottom-up. It Takes a Village looks like a book and feels like a book but in important respects it isn't a book. It is a reelection pamphlet or a stump speech; it is a 300-page press release. At no point did I find myself questioning the benignity of the author's original impulse; indeed, the book is as sincere, in its way, as anything I've ever managed to finish. And yet there is also something horrible about it. More subtext than text; ameliorative, harmonial, beamingly upbeat; it teaches an ugly lesson.

First, we have to imagine Hillary, in the Old Executive Office Building, with her staff of fifteen women (and one man: what is *he* doing there?), plus Barbara Feinman and other helpers "so numerous that I will not even attempt to acknowledge them individually", marshalling her manuscript. Their object is to reduce it to a condition of pan-inoffensiveness. This is a big job, because being inoffensive, and being offended, are now the twin addictions of the culture. Chapter by chapter, Village goes over to Bill's people, to see if they have a problem with this or are uncomfortable with that, and Bill's people bounce it back to Hill's people with what they are unhappy about, and so it goes on, until in broad daylight and full consciousness you confront printed sentences which read:

"A University of Chicago study showed that by the age of two, children whose mothers had talked to them frequently since infancy had bigger vocabularies than children from the same socioeconomic backgrounds whose mothers had been less talkative."

"The 1990 Census showed that young people without college degrees earn significantly less on average than those with degrees."

"Brisk walking, hiking and bicycling are all good exercise and are great ways to spend time together."

"In addition to being read to, children love to be told stories."

By the time everybody's done, we are out there on the cutting edge of the uncontroversial.

As for style, well, the First Lady should not be seen to be solemn. She can make jokes. But we don't want her sounding like a flake. Every joke, therefore, must wear a joke badge: it must be accompanied by a plump exclamation mark. As in "Sometimes Mother knows best too!" Or "So much for her grasp of physics!"