



BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED

FICTION

The Heather Blazing
by Colm Tóibín (Viking; \$20)

A QUIET but stunning Irish novel, which seems to derive its clear and affecting style in part from the staunch personality of its protagonist, an elderly High Court judge in Dublin, and in part from the chilly beauty of the southeast coast of Ireland, where he grew up and still spends his summers. The Judge is rigorous in his work and gentle at home, but he knows his own shortcomings, among them his virtually silent way of communicating with his wife, Carmel. Mr. Tóibín gives depth to the Judge's current life by narrating it alongside the story of his and Carmel's rocky courtship and—most vivid—the story of his austere Catholic boyhood with his widower father. This collage of migrations from city to sea and back again is a study in memory and how we unconsciously rely on it. The Judge himself is rarely aware of remembering, but his childhood, full of cold bike rides in the dark to serve at early Mass, is a primer in self-sufficiency—one that proves to be just as useful at the other end of life.

Buffalo Soldiers
by Robert O'Connor (Knopf; \$22)

YOU are Ray Elwood, manning the memorandum front at an Army base in Germany: editing the battalion newsletter, writing letters of condolence, tracing the colonel's genealogy. Afternoons are spent debating the true sex of "All My Children"'s Erica Kane while "the infantry is dug deep into the couches and chairs and holds strategic positions on the linoleum." The only target practice you seem to get is looking for a vein in your buddy's arm that hasn't already been shot out. Your Sony Trinitron, your Fry Baby, and your Mercedes are the rewards of a lucrative and ever-escalating heroin trade. Then Sergeant Lee, the new Top and an ex-user, declares you his "only war." Unfortunately, you are falling in love with his one-armed daughter, an accomplished diver and shoplifter. Mr. O'Connor's

début novel may be hardboiled, but its corrosive humor and intense journalistic curiosity reveal a peacetime Army devouring itself. Elwood is the clever yet ultimately oblivious hero, whose response to the catastrophe that is building around him is to work harder at all the schemes that got him into the mess in the first place. In the end, the idea that inspires the book's comedy has become its sour lesson: "For the Army, peace is a continuation of war by other means."

Martin and John
by Dale Peck (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$21)

LATE in her pregnancy, a woman miscarries and hemorrhages before her young son's eyes, and then wastes into something worse than a human vegetable. Her husband had insisted on a risky second pregnancy, but when his wife is dead he puts on her clothes and makeup. The son, John, runs away, to pursue other men and boys—and none of what has been told about his life is allowed to stand. In one episode, it seems to be John's mother who survived, to marry a stepfather, Martin, with whom the boy falls in love. In another, John is sharing a domestic romantic life in a small town with a man named Martin, and longing for the freedoms of being homosexual in New York—which he then experiences with an apparently different Martin. All the mothers and stepmothers, whether in trailers or luxe villas, are Beatrice, and assorted extra men are named Henry. The variations feel like revelations, driving you on in the faith that now you'll find out what really happened.

GENERAL

Power, Privilege, and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story
by Carol Felsenthal (Putnam; \$29.95)

THIS is a lively biography about an ugly duckling who grew up to become a swan, or, possibly, given Mrs. Graham's wealth and power, an eagle. Katharine Meyer's father, Eugene, was a

brilliant financier, and her mother was a self-important Valkyrie, who went out of her way to belittle Katharine. In 1940, Katharine married Philip Graham, a man with intelligence, ambition, and charm, who belittled her more thoroughly than her mother had. Eugene gave Phil the *Washington Post* to manage; it was an unprofitable investment, an also-ran. Graham, it turned out, was a manic-depressive, and his behavior deteriorated from the fifties on; in the summer of 1963, on a day leave from a mental hospital, he committed suicide. His widow, feeling inadequate both as a human being and as a woman without career training, took over, hoping to hold the *Post* together until, as her father intended, her son was old enough to run it. She did better than expected, and in 1991 gave her son control of a substantial communications empire. We cheer Mrs. Graham on, and Ms. Felsenthal is generally admiring, too. But she is by no means uncritical, and shows how Graham's lifelong insecurities, together with the machismo of the men who worked for her, made matters more difficult than they might have been. Still, as the author points out, the combination of financial success and editorial quality which Graham achieved is rare.

Eight Little Piggies: Reflections in Natural History
by Stephen Jay Gould (Norton; \$22.95)

A CONTINUATION of the series of essays that the author began writing in 1974 in the magazine *Natural History*. As usual, he ranges widely in subject matter, although his polished, provocative writing generally reflects what concerns him as a paleontologist and environmentalist—for example, the "massive" extinction of species, and the deterioration of our planet's resources. The title essay discusses a far-off time when five was not the limit to the number of fingers and toes, and traces the effect the fully articulated hand has had on the development of human intelligence. Other topics are the seventeenth-century English archbishop James Ussher, who gave us not only the year of the earth's creation—4,004 B.C.—but the actual date, October 23rd; the astonishing variations in color of pigeons' feathers; the ingenuity of Third World people in adapting the cast-off artifacts of richer nations to their purposes, as in converting used auto tires into sandals, and making kerosene lamps out of tin cans. ♦