

doctor told her—so help me, I copied this correctly—“Your eggs are scrambled. They were not properly packed or frozen. We cannot proceed.”

But we must. This was a *project*, and every grad student knows what that means: You have to finish it and turn it in at the end of the trimester or you won't get credit. Abandoning the surrogacy plan, Wasserstein replenished her supply of embryos and had herself implanted with them until, eight years after she started trying, she finally got pregnant at the age of 48. The account of the rest of her ordeal has all the elements of a Lifetime Channel movie set in an obstetrics ward: women in perpetual states of self-discovery, female bonding in the sisterhood of the stirrups, the noble African-American mother in the next bed, one life-threatening emergency after another, and no kidney stone left unturned.

Wasserstein's baby, weighing less than two pounds and afflicted with various lung and brain problems, was delivered by caesarean in the sixth month and had to remain in an incubator for three months. But the infant lived, and the book carries the de rigueur single-motherhood blurb: “Wendy Wasserstein lives in New York City with her daughter, Lucy Jane.”

Wasserstein calls her writing “satiric,” but she never goes for the jugular when the jocular will do. The title essay, in which she gives herself WASP roots to match Hillary Clinton's claim to Jewish roots, is a heavy-handed riff, full of trite Aryan-from-Darien stereotypes long since run into the ground by Philip Roth and Gail Parent. What passes for humor here is the fluffed-up agony of women's magazines, where many of these pieces originally appeared, or brittle New York smart talk involving name-dropping, place-dropping, and label-dropping. Lunch with Jamie Lee Curtis, dinner with Tom Brokaw; Armani this, Russian Tea Room that; Bottega Veneta bags here, Plaza Hotel there; and a bizarre story about using votive candles for shoe trees, “which accidentally burned my Manolo Blahnik pumps.” Even the baby has an “Isolette-brand incubator.”

Wasserstein seemingly considers herself a cultural leader, but she comes across as the kind who leads where everybody is already

WQ

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going. She talks the talk about liberation and self-determination, yet she follows every fad.

—FLORENCE KING

THE DEATH OF COMEDY.

By Erich Segal. Harvard Univ. Press.
589 pp. \$35

“I fart at thee!” The motto on the Farrelly brothers' crest? Nope. It's the first line of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), and just a trace of the abundant evidence in Segal's book that the comic theater has always had a rude streak. A lewd streak too, right from the start in ancient Athens, where the comic actors wore outsized phalluses and the nimble theater-going citizens divided their time between feeling patriotic and feeling randy—or, when roused by Aristophanes, feeling both at once.

Segal traces the history of dramatic comedy from A (Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C.) to B (Samuel Beckett in the 20th century A.D.). He first describes comedy's origins in Greek festival and ritual, especially rituals of rebirth, erotic renewal, regeneration, and rec-

conciliation, and he then recounts how the Western tradition took hold of those elements and ran with them for two and a half millennia. Comedy lost its breath when the absurdist playwrights of the 20th century—Jarry, Ionesco, Cocteau, and Beckett—substituted head for heart and willfully destroyed the classical forms. Whereas the great heroes of comedy take on the world with extravagant gestures and profligate language, Beckett's characters are all but immobile, out of words and out of energy.

Segal, a classicist, a best-selling novelist, and a veteran of the theater, movies, and television, is an engaging and immensely well-informed guide through the literature. He believes in the virtues of old-fashioned chronology, and his major figures take the stage comfortably on cue: Aristophanes, Euripides (the tragedian with a comic gene), Menander, Plautus, Terence, Machiavelli (between the preceding two comes a 1,500-year intermission during which comedy bides its time, "with steely churchmen preaching against the diabolical dangers of all stage plays"), Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, and Molière. The book grows thick with Segal's summaries of individual plays. He's generous with his citations, and free—wanton even—with his translations.

Yet you may not laugh, or even smile, at much of what's here. That's because an awful lot of comedy travels about as well as six-year-old kids. Consider Menander, about whose plays, from the Greek comic theater of the late fourth century B.C., it was easier to be enthusiastic when we could also be wistful: We had only fragments of them until a complete play, *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*), was found in 1957. The excuse then became that we had found the wrong play. And yet, for centuries, both Greeks and Romans thought Menander peerless. "O Menander and life," wrote one ancient commentator, "which of you is imitating which?"

In terms of influence, Segal deems Menander "arguably the single most important figure in the history of Western comedy." Why? Because he excelled at

putting realistic characters from life—young lovers, ill-tempered old fathers, cooks, soldiers, slaves, virgins, prostitutes—on stage, where they have remained, and multiplied, ever since. Menander's quintessential plot is motivated by love, usually at first sight, and driven by ingenious (mechanical?) complications and giddy (inane?) misunderstandings, such as rapes that aren't rapes after all because in due course the parties legally unite. The misunderstandings are resolved; a marriage occurs; progeny are in prospect. Sound familiar? Were he around today, Menander would be writing for TV. Not *The Simpsons* or *Malcolm in the Middle*; maybe *Dharma and Greg*.

Thank goodness Segal knows that a play lives a sheltered life, at best, on the page. His heart is on stage with the players, and he's not afraid to sink to—no, sink below—the jokey level of his subject. When tradesman Ben Jonson gives up manual labor for playwriting, Segal has him "throwing in the trowel." And near-miss incest is "Oedipus interruptus." Twice. It's not every scholar who can also do Mel Brooks.

—JAMES MORRIS

A COMPANY OF READERS:
Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden,
Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling
from the Readers' Subscription and
Mid-Century Book Clubs.

Ed. by Arthur Krystal. Free Press.
289 pp. \$26

In 1951, historian Jacques Barzun, literary critic Lionel Trilling, and poet W. H. Auden sat down together and formed a book club. The



(l. to r.) Jacques Barzun, W. H. Auden, and Lionel Trilling