

al or homosexual, or daring or timid. He lays into suggestions from evolutionary psychology that male assertiveness and female coyness (not to mention everybody's sweet tooth) are genetically hard-wired. Much of his argument is that the things the sociobiologists say they are explaining do not exist in the first place. Male and female roles are not the same in every society; there are no universal standards of female attractiveness or male desirability; even the human sweet tooth is not universal (Nigerians don't like candy, or so he says a friend told him).

This is a polemic, in other words, but a polemic against what, exactly? In his attacks on oversimplified misconceptions, Lancaster will find many allies among scientists. When it comes to assessing the science itself, he is less authoritative. For example, he makes much of the alleged "gay gene," announced in the 1990s, and explains at some length why the idea of a single gene determining sexual orientation won't fly. Fair enough, but he seems unaware that few scientists took the idea or the evidence all that seriously in the first place.

In fact, I think it would be difficult to find many reputable scientists who are unreconstructed reductionists of the type Lancaster

finds so irritating. He convincingly demolishes a number of simplistic arguments from evolutionary psychology, but seems to think he has thereby undermined the whole enterprise. And he hews to an extremism of his own, embracing the social constructionist's creed that "there is no such thing as human nature independent of human culture." He never provides any justification for this ideology, apart from rounding up declarations from the usual suspects: Karl Marx, Clifford Geertz, and the like.

Still, for all his vehemence, Lancaster is a fluent, often funny, and (dare I say it?) good-natured writer. He divests constructivist theory and gender studies of their usual obtuse jargon and acknowledges the silliness of some ideological critiques of science.

In the end, though, he seems to wish that genes, insofar as they have anything to do with brain function and psychology, would just go away. In the old nature-versus-nurture argument, the correct but murky position, it seems to me, is that both are important, and in ways that cannot be fully disentangled. Some people are happy inhabiting this gray, ambiguous middle ground; others hanker for black or white. Must be one of those genetic things.

—DAVID LINDLEY

ARTS & LETTERS

THE EDEN EXPRESS:

A Memoir of Insanity.

By Mark Vonnegut. Seven Stories.

301 pp. \$13.95 paper

First it was the constant crying. Then the trees were angry at him. Out of nowhere came the wrinkled, iridescent face. When he threw a cue ball at a window, his hippie friends called his famous novelist father, who got him to a mental institution. Mark Vonnegut had two more breakdowns, but after Thorazine shots and electroshock therapy, he was cured, never to be schizophrenic again.

When this account of Vonnegut's illness first appeared, in 1975, it was a rarity. At the time, the only other memoir of schizophrenia was *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (1951), by an author who, with pre-Jerry Springer delicacy, had given only her first

name, Renée. Since Vonnegut's book, the schizophrenic memoir subcategory has blossomed: Jane Rittmayer's *Lifetime* (1979), Lori Schiller's *The Quiet Room* (1994), Ken Steele's *The Day the Voices Stopped* (2001), and even Philadelphia Eagles cheerleader Christina Alexandra's *Five Lost Years* (2000).

Vonnegut's book differs from all of them. He intends *Eden Express* to be something of an apologia for the 1960s—"We were not the spaced-out, flaky, self-absorbed, wimpy, whiny flower children depicted in movies and TV shows. . . . Things eventually went bad, but before they went bad hippies did a lot of good. Brave, honest, and true, they paid a price." The majority of the book describes the commune Vonnegut and other 1969 graduates of Swarthmore College set up on an old farm in remote British Columbia. They raise goats, repair a house, live off

the land (sort of but not really), eat (mostly) macrobiotic vegetarian food, take mescaline and LSD, and, of course, smoke buckets of marijuana.

The Eden Express's biggest difference from the rest of the madhouse memoirs is that the author's father is a counterculture giant, one whose best novels are animated by dark absurdity. Father and son share affinities and contradictions, but this book leaves them untouched. It seems only to say, "Look what happens when you have a dad who's a hippie icon in an era when anything goes—you go crazy! But not so fast. Hippiedom was harmless. Look, I got better and wrote a book about it. We were right all along!"

The confessional and harrowing particularity of the current memoir craze would have helped *Eden Express*. This book about intense feelings lacks feeling. Vonnegut never comes to life. He advances a cockamamie theory that multivitamins cured him of schizophrenia, though he disavows it in an afterword written for this edition—he did, after all, go on to Harvard Medical School and become a pediatrician—and admits that he wasn't really schizophrenic, but manic depressive.

In the end, there is a pervasive sense of falseness here, a maddening skimming of surfaces while purporting to get to the deepest interiors. Not very brave, not completely honest, Mark Vonnegut never paid much of a price for the 1960s. For brave honesty, read "Letter from Birmingham Jail," not this pseudopsychiatric memoir full of wimpy, whiny flower children.

—LORRAINE ADAMS

MIDNIGHT LIGHTNING:
Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience.

By Greg Tate. Lawrence Hill Books.
157 pp. \$18.95

In few fields has the label *genius* been applied more recklessly than in rock 'n' roll. One of the few rock stars truly deserving the label is Jimi Hendrix, who was not only a vir-



Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock in 1969.

tuoso guitarist and consummate showman but a musical visionary and writer of enduring songs. His career as a headliner was meteoric, from the release of his jaw-dropping debut album *Are You Experienced?* in 1967 to his drug-related death in 1970 at age 27. The Hendrix industry has thrived in the years since, cranking out countless records, movies, books, tributes, and imitators, as well as endless speculation about what might have been.

Midnight Lightning is the latest and, in many respects, the strangest of the books. Greg Tate, a staff writer at *The Village Voice*, provides a remarkably astute examination of Hendrix's protean talents. The effortless precision with which he positions Hendrix in the context of subsequent guitarists is music criticism at its best. But Tate has loftier goals than mere biography or technical appreciation. He seeks to place Hendrix—a black man who was largely ignored by the black community—in a racial context.

Himself African-American, Tate announces up front that "this is a Jimi Hen-