

Book Reviews

Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture. Ed. Mark Dery. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke Univ. Pr., 1994. 349p. \$13.95, acid-free paper. (ISBN 0-8223-1540-8). LC 94-24517.

After reading this book, a word and a name are ringing in my ears: cyberculture and William Gibson. If I never read them again, it will be fine with me. Why? Because they are bandied about in this book like pinballs. They are mentioned so often that they read as clichés.

Now that I have that off my chest, I can say that *Flame Wars* offers an intriguing mix of essays intended to "remind us that our interaction with the world around us is increasingly mediated by computer technology." We all know what flame wars are; here they are described as "vitriolic, on-line exchanges." The title is intended to be ironic because most electronic communication is decorous; however, according to the editor, studying flame wars now is useful because it allows us a glimpse of our future.

All this is fine and makes perfect sense. However, these essays scarcely address the stated topic. The editor's introduction is basic, explaining emoticons, snailmail, and how bulletin boards work. The fourteen contributors, a combination of academics, science writers, and science fiction writers, address everything but flame wars. They also generally assume the readers' familiarity with the language and literature of cyberculture and science fiction. This often leads to passages that are very difficult to read, such as: "my impulse is not only to contextualize the dimensions of cyberculture, but to call forth its millennial spark."

There is a chapter on *Mondo 2000*, a cutting-edge, information-age publication that analyzes its readers, its prose and language, and its commercialism (its ads). Another chapter uses as a jumping-

off point the fact that William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* on a manual typewriter, and ends with a fascinating exploration of the link between cyberculture and its historical forebears. There are discussions of virtual reality as a plot device and on the connection between science fiction and technology. One chapter is an excerpt from the science fiction book *Synners*, which focuses on the entertainment industry of the future, an industry that will feature virtual reality. This chapter is followed by a critical analysis of the novel. Claudia Springer writes about the relationship between computers and sexuality, and of some of the software programs developed for this type of anonymous exchange. Gareth Branwyn recounts his experiences after joining an online sex discussion group. An interview with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose focuses on the question of why so few African Americans write science fiction. Julian Dibbel explores *MUDS*, and others cover artificial intelligence. Finally, there is a chapter by Survival Research Laboratory, a group that presents shows consisting of "a set of ritualized interactions among machines, robots, special effects devices, and computers." The show discussed was presented in Graz, Austria, and was a provocative performance that targeted Austria's attitude toward the war on its border. A thoughtful analysis of society's values and the use of technology wraps up the collection. The book closes with a glossary (yes! but not detailed enough) and an index.

Collection development librarians should know that most of this book was published as an issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (92:4, fall 1993). Although the language and concepts are often difficult, the book offers access to subjects that can be tricky to track down. By presenting a vision of the use of technology



that differs considerably from most of our day-to-day lives as librarians (I suspect), it connects us that much more to our users. The latter was borne out by a check of the circulation history of the copy in Harvard's Widener Library; it has already circulated four times! Moreover, if Dery is correct, *Flame Wars* offers a preview of how popular culture will evolve in the years to come.—Ed Tallent, *Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

Gates, Bill (with Nathan Myhrvoid and Peter Rinearson). *The Road Ahead.* New York: Viking, 1995. 286p. + 1 CD-ROM. \$29.95. (ISBN 0-670-77289-5).

The Road Ahead has already been widely reviewed. Some reviewers have suggested that Gates too often takes the easy way out. They say that he sanitizes and waters down, that we do not really learn anything new about his life or his take on the future, and that he dodges the meatier issues (e.g., the introduction of Windows 95 last fall, the destructive competition of technology companies, or the problem of helping current have-nots become "haves" on the information highway).

These critics raise valid points insofar as readers already aware of Gates's career and conscious of the information age will find much that is bland rather than provocative. Still, for people who want to establish a foothold in the information age (and this is most of us), *The Road Ahead* is a lucid, readable presentation of what has happened, what is happening, and what might happen. It should not be surprising that Gates would rather offer something for everyone than a greater specificity which would be of interest to only a few readers. He is a businessman and, as such, wants to sell his book and the accompanying CD-ROM (whose "Ask Bill" feature allows the user to understand Gates's broad picture in seconds).

The Road Ahead is of immediate concern to librarians. What I found of most

interest was not whether Gates's points are correct (many are, if others still await resolution) but, rather, whether his hard-hitting business acumen translates well to the "gentle" world of libraries and librarians. Gates raises three issues worthy of librarians' consideration: content, business, and personnel.

What Gates calls the "content revolution" is best illustrated by a picture in a recent *National Geographic* of Gates sitting atop 55 feet of paper while holding a CD-ROM. The CD holds more information than the pile of paper. One day, Gates notes, data carriers the size of our fist could hold the contents of the Library of Congress. With paper out and CDs and other technological advancements in, libraries must be able to accommodate this revolution. Because library users will be able to access information through an increasing variety of ways, librarians will need to mediate the transfer of information.

It is to Gates's credit that he views Microsoft in both absolute and relative terms. We are doing great, he acknowledges, but we can still do better. Librarians, too, must think like this. Now more than ever, libraries need to position themselves in the best economic light in such a way as to illuminate the intellectual richness of library resources and to counter the negative impression fostered by the high costs of library materials. If librarians are to excel, new operating practices must be implemented. This can be done in several ways. First, libraries must increase their purchasing power by leveraging themselves whenever possible. Second, libraries must state their missions and fulfill them. This is obvious, yet too often the extraneous wins out over the essential. Third, libraries must raise, at an even faster rate, additional funds for their operations.

Gates speaks about businesses needing to renew themselves constantly. Staying in the forefront, he maintains, is necessary to remain ahead of one's peers.