

Kathleen M. Blee. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 228 pp., \$25.00.

We need to know more about why people become racists and what their motivations are for joining racial supremacist groups. Scholarly works dealing with the Ku Klux Klan's meteoric 1920s rise usually emphasize how rapid post-World War urbanization, agricultural depression, and fears of immigrants and cultural changes unsettled traditional-minded citizens in small-town and rural American landscapes and made the Klan attractive. By choosing to concentrate specifically upon women in the Klan, and "the complex ways in which race, religion and gender interact," Kathleen Blee, a sociology professor at the University of Kentucky, has opened up new dimensions here.

In Indiana, where the Klan had exceptional strength and penetrated almost every level of society and government, half a million women, or *one native born woman in three*, was a member of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). Blee, after a meticulous investigation of archives throughout the state, interviews, and correspondence with surviving Klanners, arrives at some (discomforting) answers as to why the Klan (WKKK)—despite its vicious internal power struggles—proved such a formidable magnet.

What this study vigorously refutes is the familiar and simplistic notion that the Klan was the bailiwick of pathological individuals on the periphery of society. The Klanswomen we meet in the text (and ample footnotes) are all too representative of 1920s Indiana; they are from farms, small towns and large cities alike, and every social class. Many, in fact, were drawn to the Klan from movements for the protection of women's rights such as temperance and suffrage; Blee believes that it was the Klan's special genius to flexibly accommodate such women within its organization, and to provide a vehicle for advocacy of equality between white Protestant men and women within the larger Klan agenda of nativistic racial and religious bigotry. Coexistence, however, between WKKK leaders and an astonishingly corrupt, male-dominant Klan leadership was always tenuous. Ultimately, the author attributes much of the Klan's dramatic fall to the gaping contradiction between the Klan's claims to protect "white womanhood" and the sexual brutalities of its misogynist male leaders.

The most penetrating (and disturbing) insight of *Women in the Klan* is its linkage of the fantastic Klan success at recruiting Indiana women to *normal* patterns of thinking and behavior, or "the institutions and assumptions of ordinary life of many in the majority population of Indiana." Indeed, Blee makes a convincing case for the seamless identity of the "Invisible Empire" with a 1920s Indiana culture suffused by racism, xenophobia, and parochialism. How easy it was then to superimpose "Klannish culture" on top of this pre-existing Hoosier one.

What is striking is the similarity of what Blee is describing here to what occurred in Germany only a few years later. The "spectacles" (marches, cross burnings, festivals, etc.) provided by the Klan to incite its supporters, the

thuggery, violence and economic boycotts it used to terrorize its enemies, its fit with the larger culture, the sadism of its leaders and manipulations of human idealism and search for meaning; all are redolent of the Nazis. The “normalcy” of Klan activities and ideology to Klanswomen is reminiscent of Arendt’s “banality of evil.” A connection might have been made here.

Ultimately, this study validates what race relations theorists have increasingly noted since Allport and Myrdal: the presence of the multiple (and often, contradictory consciousness) in the prejudiced. Blee asks: “How did white Protestant women come to identify their interests as women with the Klan’s racist, anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic agenda?” At the end of this fine book, we have a very good idea indeed.

— Noel J. Kent
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Edith Blicksilver. *The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle*. Expanded printing. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1989) 471 pp., \$29.95.

The original edition of *The Ethnic American Woman* was published in 1978 with 381 pages. For the 1989 edition, the author has added two new sections with a total of ninety-three new pages. “Unit Thirteen: Daring To Be Different” contains sixty-three pages of fiction, poetry, and memoirs from contemporary women writers of German, Russian, Jewish, Anglo, African American, Mennonite, Italian, Chicana, Rumanian, Polish and Irish backgrounds. “Unit Fourteen: Scholarly Essays” is a particularly welcome addition of thirty pages containing essays by Evelyn Avery on blacks and Jews in the fiction of ethnic women, Caroline Dillman on the Southern woman as ethnic, Ruth Adler on the Jewish mother as seen by American Jewish writers, and Sarah Jackson on the South and Southerners.

Blicksilver includes white women, American women of European descent, in her definition of ethnic, certainly a contentious choice. Perhaps this volume should make some concessions to the realities that non-white women face in America. It is one thing to be Irish American in Chicago, quite another to be African American there, or anywhere in the country. Many people of color categorically refuse to accept any whites as ethnic. Some discussion or recognition of these differences would help focus the material in this excellent and comprehensive collection.

“If you’re white, you can’t be ethnic” is a commonly heard declaration. One personal memoir, “Un-Assimilated,” by Angela G. Dorenkamp, puts the ethnic argument to rest. The Italian American author says, at the breakup of her marriage to an “American,” that “I should never have left my neighborhood,” and she regrets the compromises she made toward assimilation: “I had traded natural and vital qualities for bland and artificial ones, for a tentative place in an