

READING

A FAN'S NOTES
BY RALPH KEYES

By knowing this man through his *A Fan's Notes*, I know myself better, especially those parts of me which have to do with being male in America

Friends for years had been telling me about *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley. Exley was a "writer's writer," they said, his novel "gutsy—painful and honest."

For most of those years I didn't feel up to a book that was painful and honest, so although I bought a copy and examined its cover from time to time, *A Fan's Notes* mostly made me feel guilty as it sat unthumbed in the "should read" section of my bookshelf.

Alix Kates Shulman finally got me to dust off Exley's novel when she quoted from it in an essay on back-seat sex. Then I even read it.

A Fan's Notes is the "fictional memoir" of "Ex," a disintegrating would-be writer

past thirty who in between trips to the mental hospital watches football games in bars and reviews his life. Leaving such a bar one night with B., the twenty-year-old brother of a high school buddy, and the girl B. picked up, "Ex" continues:

(We) ended at my motel room where, getting me alone in the bathroom, B. offered me what he called "first shot" at the girl. I declined, thanking him rather too profusely. I fell asleep that night listening to their mating noises from the adjoining bed. My initiation into sex had taken place on the ground behind a billboard sign advertising beer within walking distance of where I was now lying. The

girl had received, with neither complaint nor enthusiasm, a good part of Watertown High School's 1945 football team. Afterward I had to help her up and walk her, while she clung unsteadily to my arm and wept, to her house some distance down the highway. Listening now, it occurred to me that I hadn't come very far over the years—no farther really than from one "gang bang" to another, save that I had learned, as B. had yet to learn, that tomorrow the pain would be even greater.

The middle of that passage, about the girl behind the billboard, is one Ms. Shulman quoted as an example of what men get away with in high school, which it is. But the passage as a whole, and the book, are more. Growing up male in America can involve casual cruelty, condoned when not initiated by many of us who today "know better." But I doubt that feeling guilty and denouncing the way we were will help men come to grips with themselves any more than will aping John Wayne and denying that anything's the matter with the way men relate to women.

This is why, six years after publication, a book like *A Fan's Notes* feels so helpful to me as I struggle with being male in 1974's America. Lacking the polished elusiveness of a Vonnegut, or the chest-beating brilliance of Norman Mailer, Exley's ragged and unpolished writing is painfully honest in a way any man can rec-

ognize, to himself, in the privacy of his reading.

The theme reaching out most for me in this memoir is that of feelings left unspoken between men, particularly between men and their fathers. Ex recalls playing before a crowd a group of old-timers led by his father. The elder Exley, a legendary football hero at the same school, sinks three shots in the two minutes his son is put in to guard him. Ex writes of the memory, "All the way home I had to repress an urge to weep, to sob uncontrollably, and to shout at him my humiliation and my loathing. 'Oh, Jesus, Pop! *Why? Why? Why?*' I have always been sorry I didn't shout that humiliation. Had my father found the words to tell me why he so needed The Crowd, I might have saved my soul . . . but at that moment, with his ungloved hand exposed to the fierce cold and resting familiarly on my shoulder in apology for the words he could not utter, I was wishing he were dead."

Ex's father does die, of cancer, and his mother re-marries a decent man whom her son abuses relentlessly. Finally Ex's vitriol gets so out of hand that his mother and father are forced to commit him. "I kissed my mother," Exley writes of their parting at the hospital, "who looked tired and pained and wept quietly. Then I shook hands with my stepfather. His strong hand was limp and uncertain, as though he didn't know how we stood, and he turned quickly away from me and descended the concrete steps. I wanted to call him then, to tell him I was sorry for so many things. I wanted to do this, for I had suddenly seen that the pain I had caused my mother had become his pain, and that that pain bound us together as much as ever filial affection does, that, in a way, he was my father now. But I hadn't the strength to call after him. Instead, I turned and went quickly into the insane asylum."

I know very little about Frederick Exley. *A Fan's Notes* is his only book, though he's also published poetry. According to the paperback's cover, Exley's work won the William Faulkner Award for best first novel of 1968. But Exley's single novel resonates so honestly with me that I feel intimate with its author. By knowing this man through his *A Fan's Notes*, I know myself better, especially those parts which have to do with being male in America.

Most men, I know today, after being put on the defensive by the women's movement, are now searching for a way to be a man with both honesty and pride. A male-oriented literature neither boastful nor submissive would be a great help in this search, and *A Fan's Notes* feels to me a good beginning—one man's effort to help us understand without apology what it means to grow up male in America.

Ralph Keyes is a Fellow of the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California and the author of We, the Lonely People (Harper & Row).