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## LETTERS

### Under the Roof

TO THE EDITOR:  
Having just finished reading Gay Talese's little black comedy, "The Voyeur's Motel," I am glad the Book Review saw fit to pull in the big guns of the media detective Jack Shafer to review it (July 17), providing his valiant attempt to stop the oozing slime of noxious human conduct from leaking back into the very society whence it came. Shafer is just one of many writers to recently enjoy the righteous pleasure of publicly flogging his journalistic forefather, the legendary Gay Talese, for looking where he shouldn't.

But this holier-than-thou ballyhoo is but a diversionary tactic, insidious in the extreme. While the tall black hats of the Puritans take a triumphant turn about the room to incestuous applause for revealing the smarmy ethics of all involved — gotcha! — the truly "controversial" subject of Talese's tale has been neatly avoided. And why not? How we all actually behave behind closed doors is no Charlie Rich romance and is rarely ethical, often disgusting, and frequently tragic — particularly, sexually, for women one might meekly note, yet again. It is our God-given right to not look — particularly when someone is doing precisely what we do.

So out goes the baby with the bath water and all the fascinating, vile, delicious, brutal, dishonest, hilarious, ridiculous, hypocritical, sexy, deeply moving and affirming details in Talese's book are washed away in a hurricane of haute disdain. All we really learn from Shafer's review is, alas, as revealing as if he were a specimen under the motel owner Gerald Foos's roof: He appears to be a man with a moralistic hammer who sees only nails while the astonishing, amoral mess that is our humanity passes him by.

The real moral of Foos's oh-so-American story: Next time you're in a hotel or motel room take a moment to look up at the ceiling vents and behave yourself. Or not.

TONI BENTLEY  
LOS ANGELES

*The writer is the author of five books, including "The Surrender."*

### Nordic Track

TO THE EDITOR:  
Michelle Dean's review of Anu

Partanen's "The Nordic Theory of Everything" (July 24) lacks nuance in a way similar to the book she is assessing. To make assertions about everything that's right in Finland (or Canada) and wrong in the United States without a proper context is distinctly ahistorical.

Having lived in the Netherlands as an American citizen for many years I can understand a binational view. Dual citizens are in a privileged position of being able to judge certain things as "better" in one country than the other. Yet such comparisons are often folly.

It's admirable that countries like Finland, Norway and the Netherlands exhibit more social solidarity across the political spectrum than the United States. But to a large degree this is a function of the Nordic and Dutch models having a much stronger central government. The American political structure grants far more authority to state and local governments with hugely varied preferences.

Additionally, given its population size, heterogeneity and rather fragmented social fabric, it's unsurprising that the United States isn't like Finland. It's important to appreciate differences, and not to patronize by suggesting how foolish we Americans are not to adopt a different social model. Finland may be an almost perfectly organized nation. However, it's presumptuous to think that America would aspire to be like Finland.

JOSHUA P. COHEN  
BOSTON

TO THE EDITOR:  
While vacationing recently in Norway and Denmark, my wife and I were able to engage personally with local residents. They acknowledged paying high taxes, 40 percent or more of their annual income, but they never failed to enumerate the benefits they got in return: free and excellent health care, no-cost education even through graduate programs like medicine or law, and generous retirement benefits. Most striking was their lack of any resentment about the taxes. More than one person told us how they "took care of each other." We Americans seem to have lost the sense of community that would prompt us to build structures that help us all. The rich benefit from

our system, while others struggle to survive. We need to quit the illusion that we have the best governmental policy in the world, and learn from others who are doing a better job of helping their citizens.

RICHARD EMRICH  
PLYMOUTH, MICH.

### Little Children

TO THE EDITOR:  
As much as I like Barbara Kingsolver, I was flabbergasted by her statement in the review of "Heroes of the Frontier" (July 24) that in literature "children are incomprehensibly absent from the page" and often "function as set decoration."

I just finished reading "Off-shore," by Penelope Fitzgerald, since I'd missed it when it won the Booker Prize in 1979. That story of a mother and her children living on a leaky barge on the Thames seemed as adventurous and fraught with risk as a trek to Alaska. And what about "Chocolat," by Joanne Harris, as well as her "Five Quarters of the Orange"? What about Dodie Smith's "I Capture the Castle" and its many imitators?

Every single coming-of-age novel focuses on children, of course — Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Alice in Wonderland, Scout in "To Kill a Mockingbird." So do a large number of the books labeled "women's fiction," and that book by Roddy Doyle I can't remember the title of. These child characters are "fully developed, plot-essential and behaving in a manner natural to their station."

ANNE SULLIVAN  
ATLANTA

### CORRECTIONS

A picture caption on July 24 with a review of "Shanghai Grand," by Taras Grescoe, carried an erroneous credit. The photograph of the 1939 hotel brochure was from the Jim Heimann Collection/Getty Images, not by Marcelo Sayao/European Pressphoto Agency.

An entry on the hardcover fiction best-seller list last Sunday referred incorrectly to "Aftermath: Life Debt," by Chuck Wendig. It is the second book of the Aftermath trilogy, not the third.

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