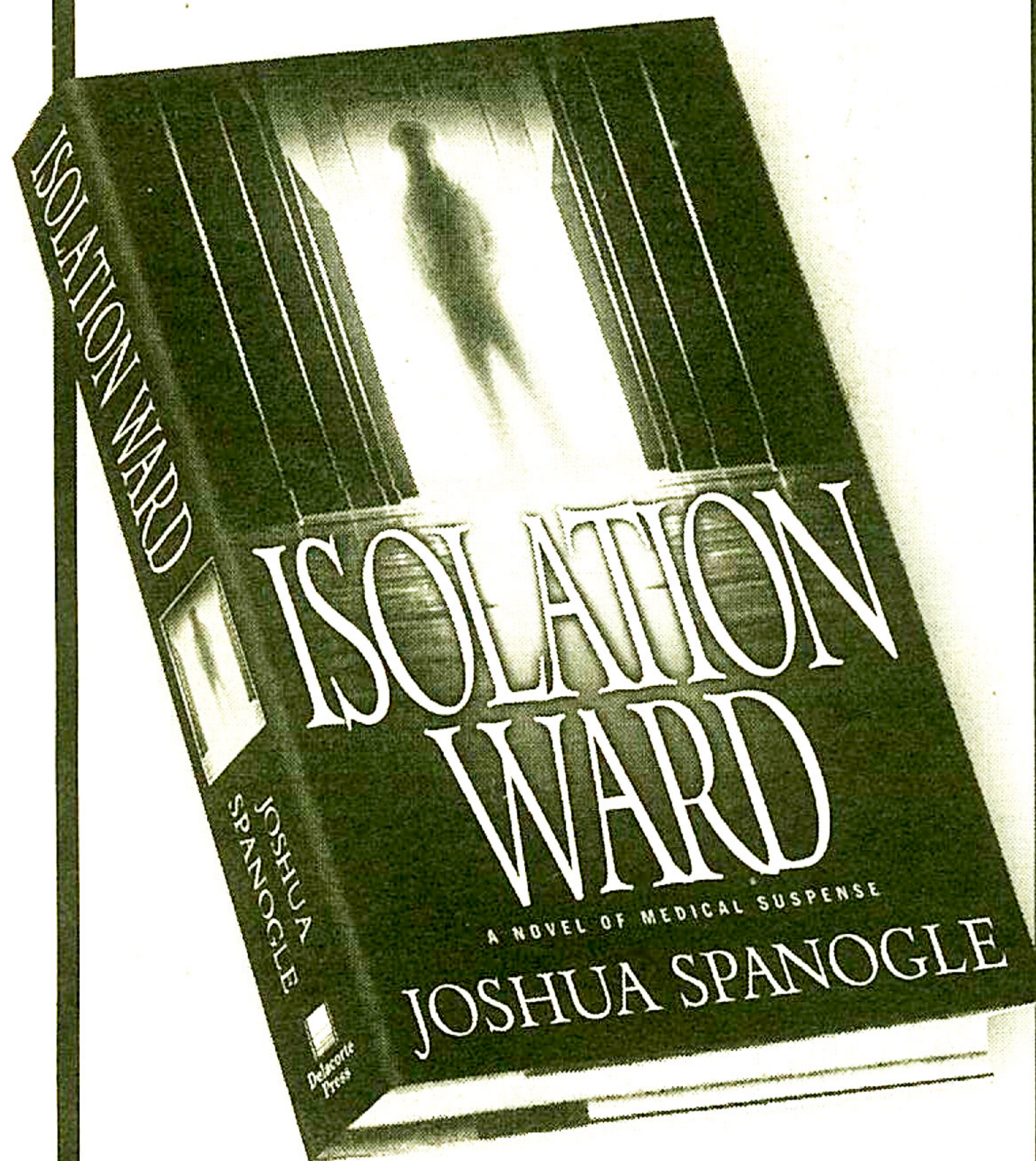


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Letters

The Seasoned Woman

To the Editor:

I keep wondering if your reviewer Toni Bentley and I read the same book, Gail Sheehy's "Sex and the Seasoned Woman" (Feb. 5). Bentley says Sheehy's "prose is sloppy and frequently awkward." Hardly. Gail doesn't know how to write that way. Bentley also seriously objects to the premise of the book — that women over 50 can and should continue to be sexual creatures, to have sex with a partner, if available, alone if necessary. Why is Toni Bentley so upset with this premise? She wonders about the intangible component called dignity — "how to have it, how to keep it, how to teach it." I've read Gail's book thoroughly and don't find a single line lacking in dignity. Gail is seriously helping anybody who reads the book have a more comfortable midlife minus any crises whatever but also filled with continued joy and expectation. Being way, way over 50 (84!), by the way, I found the book realistic and inspiring. Don't mean to sound braggish (you know I don't know how to keep secrets), but my 90-year-old playmate and I are still sexually involved — pleurably, reasonably frequently. Seems to me if we can, anybody can.

HELEN GURLEY BROWN
New York

'Breaking the Spell'

To the Editor:

Apparently The New York Times Book Review has discovered a new stunt. The most blatant examples — but there have been others recently — occur in Leon Wieseltier's campaign against "scientism" in his review of my book "Breaking the Spell" (Feb. 19). Here's how it works: When you can't stand the implications of some scientific discipline X, but can't think of any solid objections, you brand them instances of the sin of Xism and then you don't have to take them seriously! What next? A review that warns about the pernicious "meteorologism" that keeps scolding us about global warming, or the "economism" that has the effrontery to inform us that the gap between rich and poor is growing? Wieseltier helps himself to several other instances of the trick in his review: he trots out the old chestnut reductionism, from which all serious meaning evaporated years ago, and sneers at my rationalism (a handy retort to

any reasonable person when you can't think of anything better to say — "Stop being so, so, so...rationalistic!")

The very idea of an intensive scientific exploration of religion so upsets Wieseltier that he resorts to flagrant falsehoods — and doesn't even bother supporting his claims with citations. For the most part, his essay consists of quoting and hooting on the one hand, and imputing motives to me that my book strenuously rejects on the other; but then, sensing perhaps that he ought to provide at least a few demonstrations of actual errors to support his dismissal, he claims in a single sentence that I misrepresent David Hume, William James and Thomas Nagel. I do not. The claim of my purported sinning against (my longtime friend) Nagel is particularly instructive: I quote a trenchant line of his as an epigraph: "It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." Then I offer a single sympathetic sentence about how one might interpret this bold statement. How on earth can that be a misrepresentation?

So the only details in Wieseltier's long review that even purport to uncover mistakes in my book are fabrications. He was clutching at straws — and missing! Whatever could have inspired him to invent such gratuitous charges? In one of his many distortions of my views, he says: "If you disagree with Dennett, it is because you fear what he says." Actually, I recognize and discuss openly all sorts of disagreements that I do not attribute to fear, but he is right that I do often discern more anxiety than rationality in the responses to my arguments, and now I can provide yet another example of what I mean: the visceral repugnance that fairly haunts Wieseltier's railing (without arguments) against my arguments.

There is one passage that purports to be an argument, hoping to demonstrate that I contradict myself when I claim that the way our culture lets us transcend our genetic imperatives is a fact that is itself visible to, and explicable by, natural science. As an argument, it is a hopeless non sequitur, but it almost perfectly expresses the most debilitating confusion at the heart of the brand of humanism Wieseltier takes himself to be defending. "If it is a fact of biology, then we are not independent of biology," he says, betraying his hankering for a miraculous kind of inde-

pendence, a skyhook that does not and cannot exist — a fantasy that is not needed to preserve the meaning in our lives.

DANIEL DENNETT
Medford, Mass.

Leon Wieseltier replies:

Here is how a quotation can be a misrepresentation. On Page 264 of his book, Dennett cites the "trenchant" words by Thomas Nagel that he gives in his letter. They appear on Page 130 of Nagel's book "The Last Word." Dennett likes them because they leave the impression that Nagel shares his naturalistic notion of reason and his hostility to religion. But the impression is false. On Page 131, Nagel promptly denies the trenchancy of the prejudice to which he has just admitted, warning his readers that "it is just as irrational to be influenced in one's beliefs by the hope that God does not exist as by the hope that God does exist." Those inconvenient words do not appear in Dennett's book. And Nagel's meticulous discussion occurs in a chapter called "Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion," whose aim is to disabuse rationalists of the aversion to religion and to denounce "Darwinist imperialism" in the analysis of mind.

Dennett reads as excitably as he writes. I would not slander my godless friends, or Dennett, by suggesting that they live meaninglessly; I was evaluating ideas, not lives. Nor would I use "rationalism" pejoratively, since I do not believe that there is too much reason in human affairs. And I see nothing "miraculous" about the autonomy of reason — unless everything that cannot be explained by biology is to be regarded as a miracle, in which case this is indeed an enchanted world.

Correction

A review on Feb. 12 about "War of Nerves: Chemical Warfare From World War I to Al-Qaeda," by Jonathan B. Tucker, referred imprecisely to the United States' use of tear gas and the defoliant Agent Orange in the Vietnam War. Unlike most of the other substances discussed in the review, neither was designed to cause direct casualties. However, the use of tear gas to flush enemy soldiers from hiding and Agent Orange to destroy overhead cover provoked debate about whether they should be counted as true chemical weapons under international law.