

Nukesville USA

A. G. MOJTABAI'S subject is 'the intersection of nuclear reality and religious vision'; and she isn't referring to papal encyclicals, pastoral letters or the gentle activism of troubled divines. She is referring to American fundamentalism, to those Born Again Christians who have the nuclear holocaust firmly fixed in their calendars and anticipate it with the hottest zeal. 'Go understand people' is what Americans say, in despair, when they can't understand people. Miss Mojtabai, at any rate, has given it a try.

She has gone to Amarillo, Texas, a Panhandle railhead town, a place of flash floods, dust-devils and polar winds. Amarillo has known boom and bust, and now clings to a hard-won prosperity. About 25 per cent of the local economy depends on Pantex, the final assembly plant of all American nuclear weapons. The arms race would therefore seem to be 'good for business,' 'good for Amarillo.' Pantex also qualifies Amarillo as 'a class 1, 2 and 3 target' for Soviet missiles, and makes it a likely spot for nuclear accident, terrorist attack and so on. (In addition, Amarillo is now being teed up for a nuclear-waste 'facility.') Pantex's motto: *Pantexan: We believe that peaceful coexistence is best maintained by being Too Tough to Tackle.*

'AMARILLO,' says the sign on the way into town: 'WE LIKE WHO WE ARE.' One suspects that people who like who they are, and like saying that they like who they are, are soon going to be saying that they don't like who you are. But after a while the town opens up to Miss Mojtabai, with her gently persistent interrogations, her uncensorious female presence (and her novelist's eye and ear).

Amarillo opens up, like any American town, with generosity, candour, vigorous community *esprit*. The place teems with bake sales and kiddie clubs; on Sunday mornings 'joy buses' ferry the children to church. Why, Pantex itself has blood drives, car pools, educational grants for employers, and a fine record on the hiring of non-whites.

BLESSED ASSURANCE: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas by A. G. Mojtabai Secker & Warburg £10.95

'In Naples,' says a local, 'they don't worry about Vesuvius. They're used to it.' Instead of 'worrying,' Amarilloans simply find themselves leading lives of fantastic contradiction. Pantex official Jack Thompson, who coaches Little League and helps out at Kids Inc., breaks off from an hour of 'honey-dos' (chores for the wife) to tell Miss Mojtabai about Soviet infiltration in America's nurseries (infants with fake passports). Judy Mamou, ex-hooker, now an evangelist, gives an interesting slant to the Red/dead axis: 'If you're Red, you are dead.' A dead Red is just dead, whereas a dead Judy Mamou would simply 'go home' and 'be in heaven with the Lord.' Royce Elms, a preacher at Jubilee Tabernacle, has the end of time pencilled in for 1988, but carries life insurance—'in case the Lord tarries.' Royce's morning sermons, or matinées, are about 'success principles,' as laid down by the Bible ('God don't sponsor no flops'). In the evenings it's Armageddon: the Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Rapture.

The *mise-en-scène* for the end of the world is not Hieronymus Bosch so much as Walt Disney. Just before the destruction of the planet by (nuclear) fire, the Rapture occurs. Believers become astronauts, whisked up to heaven at 186,000 miles per second. Life goes on as usual for a while, though you will notice that the more devout members of the community are, rather ominously, no longer around. The Antichrist soon comes to power, via a United World Church, a cartel of corporations, or possibly the EEC.

Nuclear Tribulation follows. After seven years Christ returns and defeats Satan in the Battle of Armageddon near the hill of Megiddo in Israel. On top of sores, seas of blood, rivers and fountains of blood, fire, darkness, drought and unclean spirits, we get the

seventh vial of wrath, 'poured out into the air' — nuclear fallout, perhaps. Then a further sifting of unbelievers and the binding of Satan, who, 1,000 years later, stages his final doomed revolt. Then a new heaven and a new earth.

For most of its length *Blessed Assurance* reads like an analysis of the richest, the most elaborate brew of dumb credulity that human beings have yet concocted. Along the way, though, the phenomenon starts to look more familiar. It looks like religion. An implausible quest for implausible solace, outlandish suffering set against outlandish reward, a way of thinking (or emoting) about the unthinkable. Here, religion has adapted to the nuclear reality. As a result it looks preposterous. But everything that adapts to the nuclear reality is going to look preposterous—or ugly, or insane, or just preternaturally trivial.

Miss Mojtabai suffers, in her vivid exploration, from an embarrassment of riches, or an embarrassment of embarrassment. She takes no pleasure in gloating over human stupidity; and the wistful gloom of her conclusion feels accurate. After all, in this maelstrom of terror and desire the only things with any objective reality are the weapons — the weapons, and the holy book of a Bronze Age nomad tribe. Consider these two quotes:

1. I have read the Book of Revelation and, yes, I believe the world is going to end—by an act of God, I hope—but every day I think that time is running out.
2. You know, I turn back to [the] ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if — if we're the generation that's going to see that come about.

It would, I suppose, be neither here nor there if these remarks came from some summoner or pardoner, some Chaucerian huckster, some morons' pin-up or vaudevillian vicar of the Born Again circuit. But the first speaker is US Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger. And the second is Ronald Reagan.

THE OBSERVER

11/1/87