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### JOHN LEONARD *changing "times"*

"I ALWAYS WANTED to be the Great American Novelist," muses John Leonard. "After three novels, it was clear I wasn't going to make it." Instead, as editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, Leonard is probably the most powerful man in American book publishing—not a bad consolation prize. And a lucky break for literary buffs. Controversial, argumentative, often feisty, Leonard's new *Review* has shaken the mildew out of literary criticism. "I want it to be more than a shopping guide," he says. "We'll launch introspections, publish career essays, interview everybody in sight, even, occasionally, declare war." Unconventional is the best word for the *Review* and its 34-year-old editor, whose career is a zigzag of left to right and East to West. After flunking out of Harvard in 1958, he was discovered by William F. Buckley, Jr., who put him to work on the conservative *National Review*. "I was always vaguely liberal," Leonard recalls. "Buckley helped radicalize me." He moved on to Berkeley, where he was director of drama and books for San Francisco's radical FM station, KPFA. After a first novel, *The Naked Martini*, Leonard moved East again, this time to work with migrant apple pickers in New Hampshire. In 1967, *The New York Times* hired him first as book previewer, then as critic—and he found his métier. Witty, urbane, scathingly precise, his reviews have run the topical gamut from Nabokov to The Partridge Family. On Hubert Humphrey: "One doubts that Humphrey could inspire bacilli to connive at anthrax." On Jean Genet: "The only thing more irritating than a novel by Genet is a critical text on his fiction." On Merv Griffin: "Merv always comes on like Charlie Brown in a rep tie." Chiefly an editor now, Leonard still finds time to write—surprise!—the ubiquitous "Cyclops" column formerly in *Life* and *Newsweek*, now in the *Sunday Times*. "Editing a magazine," he says, "has none of the grosser ego satisfactions of a regular column; but there are subtle pleasures attached to it." We've noticed.