

the killer had known the victim and had staged the burglary as a diversion. "She died from strangulation but was also stabbed after she was dead, which is real evidence of rage," Pierce said. "The B.S.S.U. pointed out that the killer had stolen things but not ransacked the place. He knew his way around." This helped Pierce to identify the killer as someone who was already familiar with the apartment.

According to Pierce, the identification of serial killers in New York is especially hard, because there are so many murders. "When you have a serial killer in Seattle or Rochester, you can notice the pattern sooner," he said. "Here we've got two thousand murders a year. Tying any of them together is much harder."

## WAR MEMORIES

A SMALL delegation of Vietnamese editors and writers came to town recently for a quick tour of New York's literary world. They'd been in Boston, attending a workshop for writers from the Vietnam War, and would be going on to Washington. The editors of *The Paris Review* welcomed them one afternoon at a gathering in the living

room of the magazine's editor-in-chief, George Plimpton, who lives by the East River on Seventy-second Street. Mr. Plimpton was off on Martha's Vineyard, the editors said. The three guests of honor, who arrived a little late, were a diminutive woman, carrying a striped sun hat, and two men, who sat down on Mr. Plimpton's freshly plumped upholstery and were soon smoking Marlboros. All three were Northerners, from around Hanoi. "Thank you for allowing us to smoke," one of the men said. "Everybody still does in Vietnam." The apartment was filled with patrician odds and ends: leatherbound books, a pool table, paintings of elephants in Africa. Soft drinks had been set up in the dining room, along with a silver bucket of ice.

Huu Thinh, the senior member of the group, was formerly a colonel in the North Vietnamese Army, and is now a prominent member of the writers' union in Hanoi and the editor-in-chief of a journal called *Literature and Arts*. He said that he admires the work of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, and that he used to compose poems in the caves around Khe Sahn as the bombs were falling outside.

The other man, Nguyen Quang

Thieu, is a novelist and translator. When Jim Spencer, of the U.S. Indochina Reconciliation Project, who was the group's New York chaperone, couldn't manage to translate a particular Vietnamese word, Mr. Thieu would step in. He was wearing a bright-yellow shirt and white leather sneakers with pink tongues, and he had a penchant for proclamations. At one point, he exclaimed, "Americans are rich people, but they are crying inside from sadness!"

Le Minh Khue, the third member of the delegation, talked about her days repairing roads on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "We'd fill up a crater at night, and the next day a bomb would drop and we'd fill it up again," she said. An Army veteran, she won a local prize for her short stories in 1986. She read Hemingway and Steinbeck and Jack London in the Laotian jungle, she recalled, and began composing short stories there at the age of eighteen. Both she and Mr. Thinh became reporters for a government newspaper during the war, and she was in the forests around Da Nang when it ended.

The writers had been visiting publishers and agents around town, who had given them American paperback books to add to their collection of Vietnamese translations of American books. "Gone with the Wind" was a big seller in Vietnam now, they said, but pulp fiction was becoming popular, especially in the cities. "Sex and violence is on the rise," Ms. Khue observed.

Outside Mr. Plimpton's windows, barges slipped down the East River in the afternoon heat. Mr. Thinh smoked his Marlboros in silence, but Mr. Thieu kept up a general patter with the *Paris Review* people. Meanwhile, Ms. Khue looked carefully around the room and talked quietly about the war. "It was exhilarating for the war to end, but to see all the death and wreckage was very depressing," she said. Still, she feels no bitterness toward Americans. "They're people now," she said.

## CHARGING AHEAD

EARL TAKEFMAN is a bouncy businessman who wears a close-cropped beard and seems inexhaustible, like the Energizer Bunny. He phoned the other day to offer a private demonstration of a new gadget that he said was





going to set the battery industry on its ear. His instructions were to meet him at his offices and bring along four dead AA alkaline batteries. In a cramped suite in the Toy Building, Mr. Takefman clipped the batteries into slots in a shoebox-shaped plastic box, closed the lid, and flipped a switch that activated a little red light. Then, with his partners in the venture—Michael Golding, a retired cardiovascular surgeon, and Les Broadway, a businessman from Vancouver Island, Canada—he sat back to await the results. The three were not in the least fazed by a widely publicized claim on the part of Duracell, the world's leading maker of disposable alkaline batteries, that recharging dead disposables could not be done successfully—and, if it were attempted, could be dangerous enough to cause bodily harm from a rupture or an explosion—or by the fact that a spokesman for Duracell had described their gadget as snake oil.

Mr. Takefman said the device was only a prototype and needed more testing before he would commit himself to full-scale production. "We don't want to mislead anybody that this is going to be the next world invention," he said cautiously. But then he added, "I think it will be." After about half an hour, Mr. Takefman removed the batteries and asked Mr. Broadway to test their progress with a voltmeter. They were indubitably regenerating, even though they were still too weak to power a small flashlight.

The technology at the heart of the recharger has an exotic history. It was developed in Russia, according to Mr. Broadway, and his company, the Kensbrook Development Corporation, licensed it from a concern in Atlanta called Vista International, which had stumbled upon the invention in St. Petersburg. Mr. Broadway refused to discuss the technology, which is awaiting a United States patent, but said that Russians in the St. Petersburg area had been using it for years, because they couldn't afford new batteries. "It's a matter of necessity being the mother of invention," he said.

Mr. Takefman is a prosperous toy manufacturer, who started in rattles and bibs, and graduated to a top executive position with SLM International, the company that gave the world Buddy L Big Bruiser dump trucks, Bert and Ernie

## GUN CRAZY

**I**N the early fifties, when I went to Fordham Prep, a small high school in the Bronx run by a band of intrepid Jesuits, the only violence was an occasional cuff delivered by a faculty member to the head of a particularly dim-witted student. It was a small school, attended mostly by the sons of blue-collar families. Many of us, including me, were first-generation immigrants, but we had no difficulty mastering English as a second language without the benefit of a federally funded program. We were there to apply ourselves and to do what we were told.

So we were profoundly shaken when we heard that an algebra teacher in a nearby public high school had been shot and killed by a student. In that bygone Truman-Eisenhower era, such crimes were unheard of in any school. The murder weapon was a zip gun. A zip gun was of home manufacture, consisting of a piece of ordinary pipe, a wooden handle kept in place by string or wire wrapping, and a rubber-band-like firing mechanism similar to a slingshot's. The thing was wildly inaccurate and unpredictable, so the teacher was incredibly unlucky to have fallen victim to it.

It is a testament to our rising standard of living that today's high-school kids don't have to depend on such crudely unreliable weaponry. When I was in high school, handguns were rare and next to unobtainable. But, progress being what it is, the 1993 high schooler has a car, a CD player, and an Uzi. A Louis Harris poll published last week tells us that, among pupils in grades six through twelve, nine per cent have taken a shot at another human being and eleven per cent have had a shot taken at them by another human being. Nearly sixty per cent said

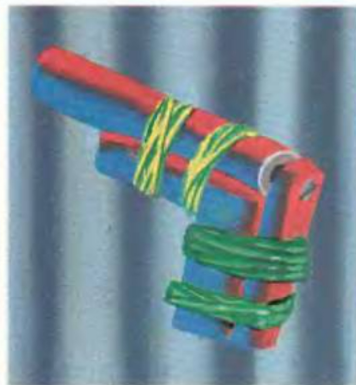
they would know where to get a gun if they needed one. Not surprisingly, more than a third of the children attending our Sarajevo-like institutions of instruction believe there is a good possibility that they will die before they reach threescore and ten. Fifty-five per cent of these young academic-combat veterans also said they would like to see metal detectors installed at school entrances. This

Dodge City, check-your-guns-at-the-door approach to the problem might go some way to achieving a cease-fire in the classroom, but it wouldn't silence the gunfire out-of-doors.

Patrick Daly, a Brooklyn elementary-school principal,

was killed in crossfire last December when he was out on the street looking for a missing student. How can young people keep their minds on quadratic equations when they know that something similar could happen to them when they come down the front steps after school? The more advanced centers of education are now training their pupils to deal with the kind of battlefield conditions that prevail in, say, Somalia or the former Yugoslavia. To be prepared for a life of scholarship, students are now being taught to use condoms and to ignore the crump of distant artillery. The militarily challenged child is also being taught how to apply a tourniquet without depositing bodily fluids on hard-to-come-by textbooks.

In my day, Mother packed a banana in your lunchbox, and you had to use that as a pistol to fake it when attempting a heist or a mugging. Today, it seems, the box contains Teflon-coated .38-calibre specials along with the trail gorp. This is certainly an advance of a sort, for at least today's students no longer have to depend on zip guns.—NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN







*"I'm cutting you off, pal. You've had enough Snapple."*

Tic Tac Throw, and child-size Harley-Davidsons. In January, he branched off into a new line—a recharger for alkaline batteries. That product, the Buddy L Super Charger, set off quite a controversy when it was unveiled. It was roundly criticized by battery makers, especially Duracell, on many counts. But Mr. Takefman was undaunted. He signed Dick Clark to promote the Super Charger on a thirty-minute infomercial, which began airing about a month ago. "Every time Duracell sees a new product, they say it's no good," Mr. Takefman said. "It's like an ostrich sticking its head in the sand."

The primary drawback of the Super Charger is that it doesn't revive dead batteries—you have to begin recharging before all the juice goes. The attraction of the new device is that it is supposed to be able to raise batteries from the dead. This could have serious commercial consequences. Even if the gadget were able to bring a dead battery back to life only once, it would potentially cut purchases of new batteries in half. Peter Barry, a battery-industry analyst with the brokerage firm C. J. Lawrence, said, "I would have to characterize the thing as quite revolutionary, if it works."

At the one-hour mark, Mr. Takefman removed the batteries for another test. Mr. Broadway applied the voltmeter to one, and knitted his brow. He performed the same exercise on another, and his consternation grew. He said, as

though thinking aloud, "I never had this happen before." Instead of reviving the batteries, the device had been slowly sucking the remaining life out of them. "Earl," Mr. Broadway said icily, "which way did you put them in?" It was soon determined that after the previous check Mr. Takefman had put the batteries in the box backward, reversing the flow of energy. Much embarrassed, Mr. Takefman put them in again, the other way around.

Since there was time to kill, he gave a tour of his workshop, introducing his staff of computer experts and artists and marketing men, all hard at work, like Santa's elves. Then it was time for another test. By now, more than an hour and a half into the demonstration, two of the four batteries registered 1.45 volts—still less than the 1.5 volts of a new battery, but enough to raise a beam in the small flashlight. The other two were measured at 1.02 volts and exactly one volt.

It was growing late, so the demonstration was brought to an end. Mr. Takefman was clearly disappointed, and insisted on keeping the batteries for further recharging. He seemed to be speaking to himself as much as anyone else when he said, "I don't want to raise false expectations until the lab tests are done. But I don't mind crowing when we got the goods." A day later, the batteries were returned by messenger, with a note saying they now ranged

from 1.54 volts to 1.66 volts—better than new.

## WRONG NUMBER

"THIS is *not* the Transit Authority," says the voice on Amy Tonsits' answering machine in Brooklyn Heights, speaking with particular care. "This is *not* Pizza Hut. This is *not* the Board of Education. Please make sure this is the number you really want." Ms. Tonsits is a victim of a New York telephone headache—getting repeated wrong-number calls because your phone number happens to differ by only one digit from a phone number that is called all day long. All that is needed to misdirect a call is one misplaced finger on a touch-tone phone. Put seven million people together, making forty-three million local calls a day, six million of which are wrong numbers anyway, and, mathematically, a certain number of sitcom setups seem inevitable.

*The New Yorker* regularly fields calls for "Bisonic" (no one at the switchboard is sure how it's spelled or what it does), and for Meyrowitz Opticians, *Billboard*, the Police Department pension bureau, and the Algonquin Hotel. A young woman in the Village is one digit away from Economy Foam & Futon Center. "All I have to do is say 'Hello,' and people just launch into questions about medium-firm neck rolls and the futon sale and made-to-order wedge pillows," she says. "The most frustrating message on my machine came from a woman who sounded very upset. 'Don't come at two-thirty,' she said. 'Do not make the delivery at two-thirty. I will not be there. If you deliver the bed at two-thirty, you will not find me there.' There was no name, no number, nothing I could do. It was a story without an ending."

A mid-Manhattan dentist's office has been getting phone calls for another dentist, a nanny service, and, over the last nine years, Lutèce. Once, a call came from London for Lutèce, cancelling dinner reservations. It was taken by the office receptionist, who says, "Since the man was so nice, I actually called Lutèce myself. But they were incredibly rude about it and didn't want to talk to me at all. So the next time I picked up the phone and said 'Doctor's office' and a woman said she needed a table for two, I just asked 'Smoking or non-smoking?'" ♦