

## BOOK BREAK

## 'A Map of the World' is gripping, poignant



VICTORIA DIAZ

"A Map of the World," by Jane Hamilton (390 pp., \$12.00, Anchor Books/Doubleday — pb).

If I were putting together a list of the five most outstanding novels I've encountered over the past five years, "A Map of the World," recently reissued in paperback, would most certainly go on that list. The reasons are countless.

Once you have picked up Hamilton's second novel ("The Book of Ruth" is her first) and begun to read it, it is almost impossible to put down. Over a lifetime, this is simply one of the most gripping stories I have ever read.

It begins on a sunny morning in early June, on a rather unremarkable Wisconsin dairy farm. Inside the farmhouse, a young woman named Alice Goodwin is tending her own small daughters and the daughters of her best friend, who has driven into town to visit a relative.

Seeking relief from the heat, Alice and the little girls soon decide to go for

a swim in the spring-fed waters of the farm pond. Alice runs upstairs to look for a swimsuit and, while she is looking, comes across an almost-forgotten artifact from her childhood — her own fanciful map of the world, created shortly after her mother's death when Alice was 8 years old.

As she momentarily loses herself in the childhood fantasy, her friend's small daughter, Lizzy, toddles out of the house, wanders into the pond alone, and drowns.

As is so much real-life disaster, this one is upon us almost before we know it, even as threads of our attention are still focused elsewhere. In just a few pounding heartbeats on only a few pages, this unforgettable, harrowing literary journey has begun.

Though Lizzy's death is at the center of this drama, her death is not really what it is about. "A Map of the World" is ultimately a story about what follows in the wake of death, as Hamilton's metaphorical ripples in a pond grow into a full-fledged maelstrom, connecting each of her characters, at the same time that it threatens to tear them apart.

Exquisitely drawn characters are what impel this story forward. Not one

of them is larger than life; instead, each is exactly life-sized, as familiar and flawed as someone you'd come across on your street, or at your dinner table, or at the beginning of your day, in your bathroom mirror.

Alice and her husband, Howard, take turns telling the story from their different points of view, revealing the substrata of their own inner landscapes as they go, along with that of their relationship, and the community.

Alice sees Howard (whom she met at an Ann Arbor vegetable stand) as "a philosophical and poetical farmer." He sees her as "intemperate . . . one minute shut up in herself and the next

dancing." They are all of this, and none of it, and much more.

Hamilton's story teems with characters, but it is hard to find one who seems superfluous or implausible. Even those who make the briefest appearances snag our attention and add to Hamilton's textured landscape. We can almost smell the "unbearable sweetness of Lizzy's sweetie head" as Alice holds her on that warm morning shortly before disaster strikes; nearly see the half-blind egg lady, Miss Bowman, wordlessly passing out her religious tracts; practically hear the upbeat voice of the ambitious realtor as she stumbles around the stony countryside on her impossible high heels.

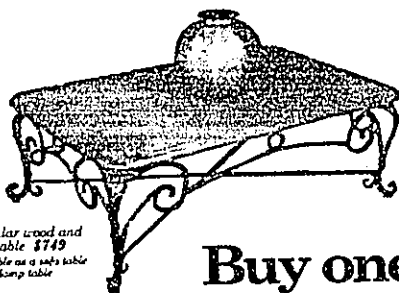
## Columnist Judd Arnett signs books

Former Observer & Eccentric and Detroit Free Press columnist Judd Arnett will sign his collection of columns, "Lessons Learned During a Wasted Youth," at several area book stores in December.

The scheduled signings are noon to 2 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2, at B. Dalton, Tel-12 Mall, Southfield (phone (810) 358-0252); 2-4 p.m.

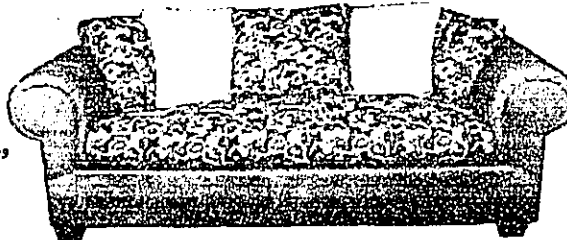
Saturday, Dec. 9, at Borders, 31150 Southfield Road at 13 Mile, Birmingham (phone (810) 644-1515); 2-4 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 13, at Doubleday Book Shop, Somerset Collection, Big Beaver Road and Coolidge, Troy (phone (810) 649-0060); and 1-3 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 16, at Waldenbooks, 214 W. Maple, Birmingham (phone (810) 258-9850).

## TWO WEEKS TO SAVE



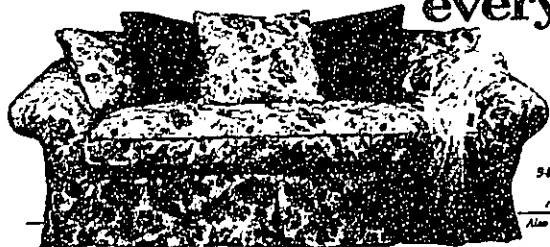
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