

Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. The fracas at the Abbey Theatre symbolizes both Irishry and the birth of Irish literature. Synge embodied both Shakespeare and the half-forgotten myths from the country's bogs. His play also brought Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats into the action: the former as patron of the arts and translator of Gaelic, the latter as impresario and listener to the rhythms of Synge's words. Kenner's account of all the real facts and Irish Facts present in the myriad reports of this event is a cabaret act in addition to being a skilled critical disquisition. He adopts the idiom of those he talks about: here he is a virtuosic table-talker. His sentences (as Henry James would say) have a brogue in them as they break. Listen to this: "It was the rioting had launched John Synge into seminar immortality, like, as the man said of someone else altogether, a shot off a shovel."

The disturbances at the Abbey and the disturbing variegation in the reports made what Kenner calls "a bag of cats" whose mewling reverberated forever. He charts the melange of reprisals and accusations and out of an instance of Dublin scandal divines the origins of Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and O'Casey. *A Colder Eye* proceeds to give us sections on each of these major figures, as well as giving space to less-well-circulated names. All is related back to the convoluted common inheritance of the Irish language

and sensibility. The life and works of Yeats also modulate through all the chapters. He is an artist who discovers "now what oft was thought, to which the poet brings new adequacy of expression; no: what ne'er was thought save by him, to which we bring our somewhat bedazzled assent."

Kenner began his career with a book about G.K. Chesterton's use of paradox and all his subsequent work has sought to locate the ingenious twists and conundrums that lurk in other artists. Kenner himself is a man of paradox: a critic who has earned the title of artist, a commentator frequently cleverer than the people he is conscripted to explain. *A Colder Eye* is the best work of literary criticism to have been published in many years, but it does mark a troubling trend in its author. He is becoming too clever. A meditation about Irishry is an attempt at the impossible, like trying to arrange into its individual conversations the bab-

ble filtered through a telephone exchange. The result is a cold eye: a glazed, almost unearthly stare like that from a corpse. To say this is to invoke his notion that *Finnegans Wake* is a cadaver shivering with insectile local life. This is the feeling left by the book Kenner has written. Brilliant, yes, but is it plausible? Perhaps the eye is that of the lens rather than of Yeats's tombstone. Kenner, like Isherwood, edited nothing from his gaze. The result is disconcerting, it is too perfect. Reading *A Colder Eye*, I felt like Chesterton playing croquet: "It is logically possible to play too well to enjoy it at all . . . The moment the game is perfect the game disappears." It is almost as though devils and fairies and ghosts, the supernatural shades of the Irish imagination, are making fun of you: "They are sending you the Perfect Game, which is no game . . . I heard the dull click of the balls touching, and ran into the house like one pursued." □

given to positive overstatement—has hailed as "... reporting raised to the level of literature. It conveys a moral truth about the terrible price paid by persons who use chemicals to treat the pain of spiritual emptiness."

Both books are worth reading, but on the principle that light matter floats to the top, and since *The Manhattan Gambit* is more of an entertainment and less of a think piece, I will attend to it first.

Imagine, if you will, a few weeks in 1943 during which Albert Einstein is putting the finishing theoretical touches on the Atom Bomb, Adolph Hitler is chewing the rug and pressuring Heinrich Himmler to come up with a counterpart, and FDR is cynically ignoring the slaughter taking place in Reich concentration camps. Add to the equation a crazed Teutonic Bonnie and Clyde duo—an escaped German POW and a brainless Valley Girl throwback who won't eat meat but enjoys butchering people—and you have the makings of a tongue-in-cheek thriller that provides good poolside reading and could be turned into a fair adventure film. Indeed, if I had to make one criticism of *The Manhattan Gambit*, it would be that the book reads a little too much like the first draft of a screenplay, with its constant mention of period props, its meticulously drawn shootouts and car chases, and its zany love scenes. I particularly enjoyed the first tryst of the Nazi Bonnie and Clyde, a neat balancing of the old Adam and Aryan sensibilities climaxing with "ten minutes later, Trattner's face was buried between Maxine Lewis' perfect breasts as she lay on his bunk staring at a portrait of Adolph Hitler." Nowadays she would probably stare at a poster of Robert Redford, but one knows the feeling.

J. Edgar Hoover (rendered with a heartfelt nastiness), Allen Dulles, Enrico Fermi, Harry Hopkins, Robert Trout, and Admiral Canaris all figure prominently in the ample supporting cast, but the bulk of the heroic action is carried out by a sturdy, world-weary Irish cop and a rather piquant Jewish lady lawyer, with a proper assist from Albert Einstein who, after much provocation, emits a primal scream and dispatches the Nazi villain with a concealed kitchen knife—truly a man for all seasons. All in all *The Manhattan Gambit* is good, occasionally dirty fun with an underlying commitment to the forces of decency and an ironic last minute twist on history.

So much for poolside reading. Ben Stein's *Ludes* is considerably deeper

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It is always difficult to write with taste about distasteful subjects. Greed, fanaticism, vulgarity, and narcissism can be made interesting, even entertaining, but they leave an unpleasant aftertaste—one of the main problems with much of our contemporary fiction and social commentary. Still, there are some writers with enough humor and insight to give us an enjoyable cartoon view of grotesque milieus, past and present. Anyone who has read Benjamin J. Stein's *Dreemz*, an inspired send-up of present-day Hollywood and Los Angeles that the *New York Times* called "a witty, scary book full of bizarre epiphanies," will know what I mean.

But Ben Stein is more than the F. Scott Fitzgerald of Tinsel Town. A

Aram Bakshian, Jr., Director of Speechwriting for President Reagan, will launch a thrice-weekly column this fall based at the Washington Times. His essays and reviews on politics, history, and the arts appear frequently in American and overseas periodicals.

frequent contributor to these pages and—to put my cards on the table at the outset—an old and cherished friend of mine, he is a writer who wears many hats. Even more to his credit is the fact that most of them fit exceedingly well. Novelist, columnist, economic analyst, scenarist, social commentator, and comic artist, Ben has entertained and occasionally edified a large public on subjects as diverse as gilt-edged securities and guilt-edged insecurities, Valley Girls and vivisectionists, Watergate and Weimaraners. He also continues to amaze with his prolific output; besides a regular column in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, frequent pieces in the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, and the occasional screen treatment, he is a seemingly endless fount of new fiction and nonfiction titles.

This summer alone, Doubleday has come out with his latest novel, *The Manhattan Gambit*, and Bantam has released a new paperback edition of his best-selling *Ludes*, a wrenching chronicle of drugs and self-delusion that George Will—a man seldom

and infinitely more depressing, the real-life story of two beautiful losers who are swallowed up by the intoxicating, self-indulgent life-style of modern, big-money Los Angeles. Lenny and Linda Brown are based on real people Ben Stein knew and loved; to follow their step-by-step self-disintegration is to feel real pain, helpless pain.

When William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize in 1950, he spoke of the essentials that go into making a real story; he might just as well have said a real life:

The old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.

The sad thing about Lenny and Linda Brown is that, while they feel a true and deep love for each other, a love far from ephemeral and actually quite poetic, and while they are capable of both pity and compassion within certain bounds, their stunted sense of life and self lacks enough internal pride or honor to lend their story an element of tragedy. They are not full people; something is missing in their makeup, not so much because of deprivation (both would probably have coped well with a subsistence society in which daily survival required full effort and concentration), but because they are exposed to a luxurious range of real temptations and false hopes that their parents and grandparents never dreamt of—that and the drugging unreality of the Los Angeles fast track.

Ben followed their story with a caring view but also with a healthy sense of skepticism about the setting. His own work in L.A., as a consultant to a famous television producer who was developing a new, political-theme sitcom, was ridiculous enough to keep his head clear ("I was mostly asked questions such as whether it would be possible to smuggle a rhinoceros into the boardroom of the Federal Reserve Board . . .") and he had plenty of time on his hands to witness Lenny's first big sale in his new West Coast role as a pitchman for shaky tax shelters:

[F]or that hour's work, Lenny made about four thousand dollars. If psychiatrists could have seen how happy Lenny was after making that much money, a whole new branch of medicine about the relation of people to money would have started, dwarfing Kohutian analysis in its scope. . . . Lenny looked as if he had been told that he would never again feel pain.

In Lenny's world, love, self-esteem, and psychic survival can only come from or be expressed through

more money, more tangible, outward symbols of having arrived. Perhaps his happiest moment arrives when, before the bottom falls out of his real estate scam, he presents Linda with a new white Jaguar. She reacts with the same kind of Pavlovian response one has come to expect of prize-winning game show contestants, shrieking, jumping up and down, and hugging her "host" husband while caressing the car's lush red-leather upholstery.

Then, as we know it will, financial ruin comes. Lenny and Linda, who might, just might, have coped in the comparatively real world of Manhattan, fall apart—especially Lenny. And that's where the *Ludes* (Quaaludes) come in; a drug that temporarily shorts out both warranted and unwarranted anxieties and quickly creates a physical dependence and diminished sense of reality. In Ben Stein's L.A., "a constant swirl of the stupid stealing from the stupider," Lenny's destruction is assured, but only after a long, sordid, but occasionally poignant ritual of self-degradation. It is a tribute to Ben Stein that, despite the obvious shallow materialism of his anti-hero and the pliant, flimsy character of Linda, he makes us feel for both of them—and wonder how many more of them are still out there sleepwalking toward doom to the tune of the book's subtitle, "A Ballad of the Drug and the Dream."

Powerful stuff, this, for marginal cases who deserve warning off, for the friends of Lenny and Linda clones, and for those of us who find it difficult to understand the lure of lucre and *ludes*. It may occasionally lapse into the maudlin, but *Ludes* is a moral, not a sentimental, tale, told with compassion and occasional glints of irony. I believe it is a book that will last, and one that will tell future generations as much about today's expanded, rather shallow lower middle-class aspirants to glitter as Fitzgerald did about that smaller, more fashionable (but, when you think about it, equally shallow) circle of beautiful losers that burnt itself out in the twenties and thirties, without benefit of Quaaludes. The weapon may have been gin instead of pills or cocaine, but the target, the vulnerability, was the same—a spiritual hollowness that, in harder times, would have been filled by the physical struggle for survival, and, in a loftier time, by a sense of self-worth and fulfillment based on something more durable than even the best engineered new Jaguar. Reader, shed a tear and thank the Lord for Ben Stein and occasional recessions. Both help us to stay sane. □

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Clay La Force.

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KGB TODAY: THE HIDDEN HAND
John Barron / Reader's Digest Press / \$19.95

Curtis Cate

John Barron's first book on the KGB—or the “Secret Work of Soviet Secret Agents” (as it was subtitled)—was published in 1974, and the pioneering spadework that went into that work continues to produce a rich harvest. Only a few years ago, it took the form of a relatively short but fascinating book devoted to the career of Viktor Belenko, a Soviet air force pilot who requested political asylum in Japan after landing an advanced MIG-25 fighter plane on a civilian airfield on the island of Hokkaido in September 1976. Today it has brought forth a larger and even more enthralling book, aimed at “up-dating” the earlier catalogue of “dirty tricks”—by telling us, for example, how the KGB, having vainly tried in late autumn 1979 to poison Afghanistan president Hafizullah Amin, had his Kabul palace stormed by a special assassination squad and team of Soviet commandos.

More than half of this book, *KGB Today*, is devoted to the life stories of three important Soviet spies, each of whom has a curious story to tell—and did so to Barron. The first, Major Stanislav Levchenko, defected from the KGB Residency in Tokyo in October 1979 and, after 24 harrowing hours (graphically described), was allowed to fly to political asylum in the United States. The second, Ludek Zemenek, alias Rudolf Hermann, rose to become a KGB colonel in the United States before being trapped by the FBI. The third, a Canadian economics professor named Hugh Hambleton, now languishes in a British prison for having all too casually transmitted scores of secret and top-secret NATO documents to a KGB officer in Paris over the six-year period from 1956 to 1961.

Of the three life histories, that of Stanislav Aleksandrovich Levchenko is for my taste far and away the most interesting—for what it tells us about the atmosphere of back-stabbing intrigue and corruption which reigns not only in the “Central” head-

quarters of the KGB's First Chief Directorate (concerned with espionage and terrorist activities abroad), but also in the various Residencies located in Soviet embassies in foreign capitals. It also offers revealing glimpses of how the KGB's Second Chief Directorate (the rough equivalent of our FBI, but vastly magnified into a gigantic eavesdropping hydra) systematically spies on officers of the First Chief Directorate, with a cynicism as ferocious as that which it exhibits in tracking down and persecuting dissidents.

Levchenko's career also illustrates how the original idealism of a privileged member of the Soviet elite is bound to be undermined by daily contact with a surprisingly attractive foreign world once he escapes from the cocoonlike insulation of the Soviet system. After a term of intensive training at the USSR's Foreign Intelligence School, located in a top-secret forest-surrounded compound near Moscow, Levchenko, who had managed to master Japanese as well as English, was sent in 1974 to Tokyo as correspondent for the Soviet monthly, *Novoye Vremya* (New Times), a magazine launched during the Second World War to provide a journalistic cover for Soviet spies. Although ostensibly an “independent” journalist who was allowed to move with his wife and child into an apartment away from the Soviet compound, Levchenko found himself directly subordinated to the local KGB Residency, which occupied the top two floors of the eleven-story embassy building. This Residency, like the Soviet embassy itself—about half of whose employees were *stukachi* (informers) forced to report on their colleagues—was a veritable snake-pit of intrigue, fomented by an Iago-type propagator of false rumors and suspicions, Colonel Vladimir Pronnikov. Pronnikov, in fact, even managed to engineer the recall to Moscow of his boss, Major General Dmitri Yerokhin.

Thanks to his engaging manners, fluency in Japanese, and ability to write articles that went beyond mere propaganda hogwash, Levchenko not

only impressed his Japanese colleagues but eventually gained admission to their prestigious Press Club—the first Soviet journalist to be so honored. He was accordingly sent a directory of foreign correspondents accredited in Tokyo, put out by the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, which, when he dropped it off at the KGB Residency, was immediately photocopied and sent on to Moscow as a “secret document”—a typical case of KGB skulduggery which won him a commendation from the Center.

As happens with so many Soviet citizens when they are exposed for some time to conditions in a foreign, capitalistic country, Levchenko was struck by the immense gap separating the distorted image of Japan as peddled by official Soviet media and the vibrant reality of a flourishing free-enterprise society with which he was daily confronted. The contrast was made all the more vivid during a period of home leave in Moscow, when he used 860,000 hard-currency yen that he had earned in Japan to buy a *Volga* car for something like \$3,660 which, sold to an unprivileged Soviet citizen in ordinary rubles, would have cost about \$14,000 and a wait of several years. The brand-new car was full of mechanical and other defects, which Levchenko had to have repaired by hiring two moonlighting mechanics, who stole the necessary parts from a rocket-guidance-system factory where they were employed.

Wherever he turned in the capital of his own country, Levchenko encountered mendacity, cynicism, and corruption. A Moscow traffic cop who stopped him for making a wrong turn was bought off with a Japanese cigarette lighter. From friends in the KGB central headquarters Levchenko heard of a KGB colonel who had been caught red-handed peddling Japanese cassettes on a Moscow sidewalk. To scrape up the money needed to buy himself a car, a KGB senior lieutenant who had not yet served abroad had taken to stealing the watches of First Chief Directorate officers while they were taking sauna baths. As a KGB colonel was heard to lament: “Two or three years ago, had any of us heard of an FCD [First Chief Directorate] officer stealing watches at headquarters or hawking contraband like an itinerant Armenian rug peddler? Now, everything is for sale. People will even sell themselves. Maybe it hasn't come to that in the FCD, but I can tell you it has in the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and Ministry of Trade. The CIA is picking agents there like apples in an orchard. Andropov himself is very worried.”

Unfortunately, it would be rash to rejoice at this revelation of the CIA's alleged ability to penetrate the upper organs of the Soviet state. Just read the chapter entitled “The Main Enemy,” wherein Barron lists some of the industrial and technological secrets that the 400 KGB and GRU (military, naval, and air intelligence) officers regularly stationed in the United States, aided by several hundred other spies from East European countries, have managed to steal in recent years. They include the advanced designs for a “quiet” radar (destined for the B-1 and even more revolutionary Stealth bomber); specifications of the F-15 fighter's “look-down, shoot-down” radar; meticulously polished laser mirrors which Soviet technicians have so far been incapable of producing on their own; semi-conductors needed for the development of integrated circuits and microcomputers (essential for accurate rocket targeting); the designs and drawings for the large C-5A cargo plane (transmitted to the USSR even before Lockheed had begun its manufacture!); plans for the U.S. Minuteman silos and for the Red-eye missile (of which the Soviet SAM-7 is basically a copy); plans for the Boeing 747, which has led to the spawning-by-spying of the Ilyushin 86. And to this list might be added the Ilyushin 76, which bears a curious resemblance to Lockheed's C-141 transport.

Such mass larceny and smuggling were made possible not only by American naiveté and the illusions of détente, but more directly by the shocking negligence of the Compliance Division of the U.S. Commerce Department, which under Jimmy Carter was allowed to dwindle to a staff of ten inspectors and 25 other personnel. As Barron puts it, the value of the advanced-technology secrets smuggled out of the United States every year by the KGB's Scientific and Technical Directorate far exceeds the annual cost of maintaining and operating the entire KGB!

No less shocking has been the absent-minded casualness of the State Department, which agreed to the Soviet Embassy's request to build a brand-new building on Mount Alto, from which superlative eminence the KGB “will be able to intercept microwave communications among many of the government's vital installations.” But the supreme scandal of all, to which John Barron devotes many pithy pages, is the brazenness with which a Soviet KGB colonel named Yuri Kapralov was able, with the willing connivance of a variety of left-wing, Communist-

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