

breadth of his scholarship, and bears testimony to the awesome proportions of the real task, which is to "meet [humanism's] challenge in the areas of ideas of knowledge, of history and philosophy." In this task Dr. Molnar is joined by a considerable number of scholars whose work during the past generation has been dedicated to the theoretical examination of the impact of ideologies such as humanism on contemporary patterns of thought. This ongoing effort is as painstaking as it is indispensable; and Dr. Molnar's book is a welcome and worthy addition. (CM) □

In Focus

Singer's Glory

Isaac Bashevis Singer: *Shosha*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

This year's Nobel Prize for literature went to Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Jewish writer from Poland who has been a naturalized American for almost 40 years. He is an uncomplicated fictionist whose philosophy is perhaps best summarized by Hamlet's famous sigh: "There are more things in heaven and on earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. . . ." Singer writes and fantasizes about these things, and the prose which comes from his pen has a first-rate quality, sober and on occasion ironic. Simple-mindedness is Singer's strongest trump card, and he is sophisticated enough to know it, even if, every now and then, he wishes to pass for someone sufficiently suited to handle more twisted human psychologies and moral dilemmas. He is sensible enough, however, to recognize that the complexities of man, world and life transcend his generic talents and tools of cognition, so he invokes the help of dybbuks, spirits and revenants — and he never fails.

As everyone in the business of quotation knows, Goethe once expressed pride in having inherited from his mother "die Lust zum fabulieren" (a desire to tell stories). To be sure, Goethe knew about writing stories with a certain something which is missing from Singer's creativity — namely the profundity of rationalizing and feeling. But in our arid times, when obscure neuroses and freakish abnormalcy constitute the mainstay of and title to literary "depth," Singer's stories of unrefined metaphysics, grounded in folktale mysticism, reveal charming relevance and validity. Therefore, it's refreshing and encouraging that storytelling has finally been rewarded by the Stockholm authority. And this with a bow to a culture which contained authentic depth, delicate and rich emotionality and fine intellectual values — and, after being brutally eradicated by the Nazis, now survives only in Chagall and *Fiddler on the Roof*, the last a rather trivialized version.

Singer's particular achievement lies in his making Yiddish, his native language in which he wrote all his work, an acquiescent and tractable instrument not only to convey his message, but also fit for adequate translation. This nearly extinct tongue, in Singer's treatment, becomes not only a state of mind but even a sociocultural substance.

Shosha is a sort of Singer compendium. All the familiar features of his writing are there: banality and charm, the gift of coloring people with life and the author's narcissism, the insightful probing into feelings and facts, which — the moment the magic of narration ends — makes us feel stranded in rather shallow waters. He has a kind of genius of being a bad and a good writer at once, in the same creative personality — and he always gets away with this duplicity. The protagonist of *Shosha*, a Yiddish writer by the name of Aaron Greidinger, is either Singer's alter ego, or

Singer *tout court*. And in profiling Greidinger and his story, Singer exposes that which is most objectionable in his recent writing. In his early work, there was strong, poetical sensualism, which was sublimated into exquisite, discreetly erotic literature, always suffused with meaningful content, an organic part of human vicissitudes. In his later writing, as if under the dubious spell of current normlessness, Singer tends to present himself, either directly in a first-person narrative, or only thinly disguised as all sorts of "Greidingers," as an irresistible sexual athlete, in whose presence women become as soft and mellow as the Lower East Side cafeteria blintzes. A reader, even the most enthralled and sympathetic, is soon uneasy, knowing that the author is a septuagenarian, and did not always write this way. Is it then a susceptibility to tawdry fashion, or perhaps — a mere Freudian suspicion — an attempt to make up in fiction for a dearth of something that plagued his factual biography? (CC) □

White's Exhibitionism

Theodore H. White: *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure*; Harper & Row; New York.

Mr. White's massive, but not unamiable, ego trip tops best-seller lists, and there must be reasons for it. One, it seems to us, is to be found in the memoir's perfectly middle-brow quality, the sort which has long since saturated the American public discourse with the uttermost banalities packaged in all the glitter of pseudo-intellectuality which the synergic effort of the *Time-Life* civilization has thus far produced. Mr. White is the arch-master of the kind; his mental penetration of the texture of history unfolding around him — mostly around the lunch tables at which performers on or observers

of the historical scene exchange insights with Mr. White — has the depth of a bowl of soup. Even journals exceedingly friendly to Mr. White, in which he's considered a contributor, did not hesitate to term his ideas about history commonplace. To us, Mr. White and his creative-intellectual profile was best epitomized by an interview in *Women's Wear Daily*, in which he enunciated:

"The moment of standing aboard the U.S.S. Missouri and watching the Japanese come aboard [to surrender] . . . was a moment that was better than sex —"

The interview featured a recent photo of Mr. White in which he looked like all Seven Dwarfs incorporated. As we thought that those

timeless little oldsters, charming as they are, are not notable for their expertise on sexual pleasures, according, at least, to the tradition of folk poetry, such a remark, "in" as it seems, puts any expertise of Mr. White into healthy doubt. The impression that Mr. White would do anything to remain on *Women's Wear Daily's* intellectual wavelength was further rein-

forced by his views on feminism:

"It's about time women had their say in the laws governing them — laws that for 5,000 years have been made by old men with shriveled-up groins —"

This was enough for us to know where to locate Mr. White in the literary spectrum. □

Stage

Lives Fractured by Rubbish

Lanford Wilson: *The Fifth of July*; Directed by Steven Schachter; St. Nicholas Theater Company; Chicago.

Rubbish was in the air those days, and everybody was hell-bent on calling it virtue, reason, beauty. Silly national weeklies extolled it as the path of the future and the contribution of America's magnificent, morally alert youth. *Time* indicated in cover stories that what we were witnessing was no less than the new dignity and nobleness of the American ethos. Wild-eyed Greenwich Village fools came to political power. A mentally debilitated Yale professor tagged all that the "Greening of America," and the gentlemanly — till then — *New Yorker*, intoxicated with the fumes of nonsense, published his drivel as its own manifesto. Boys and girls found the essence of being in a drugged stupor, fornication and numbing noise which they called music. Their social awareness had been processed into prayer wheels. Their homogenized moral impulse had become limited to seeing the communist robots who killed their American peers in Vietnam as redeeming angels of justice. Cowardice became sensibility, ignorance spirituality, and vulgarity innocence.

Many called it counterculture — a miscreated word for a freakish decade which pretended to elevate life's con-

tents by dwarfing them; others called it an historical aberration. Watching Mr. Wilson's play, one is more than certain that the latter were correct.

What Mr. Wilson did, was simply to show the '60s ten years later. As his sympathies are unabashedly with his characters (and it is not only an all-human sense of compassion for those mistreated by life, but rather an ideological affinity) while they convey a sense of morbid failure, the playwright must be commended for his work. This seminal ambivalence is, unfortunately, not helped much by the direction, which tends to blur rather than to emphasize it — a considerable feat in itself, as blurring the inherent ambiguity of a play requires a lot of counterproductive animus. To an unprejudiced eye, there's no doubt that the people on stage have made an awful mess of their lives because, a decade ago, they accepted a trendy and meretricious gospel as a guideline, embraced permissive indeterminism as a measure of conduct and emotions, indiscriminately slept at random with one another to the point where no one knows for sure who fathered a 13-year-old girl, and considered draft-evasion an opportunity for a trip to Europe to "have the time of one's life" while others went to Vietnam. Now, a decade later, their lives are in shambles, their inherited financial wealth (one of the characters, a millionaire's

Waste of Money

Schlesinger's Sentimentality

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: *Robert Kennedy and His Times*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

Whatever historical insight, seminal ambivalence, superb penmanship, scrupulousness of research and attempts at objectivity emerge from these 1066 pages, there also emerges from them a Robert F. Kennedy who is a cross between a genius and a saint. This, of course, is silly and it is much too much to pay \$19.95 for it. Thus, the most interesting aspect of the book is historian Schlesinger's valiant struggle to escape exactly this kind of projection, which he loses with a sigh of released sentiment, nursed since 1968. The real value of this wrestling between one's emotional propensities and one's intellectual inhibitions, as performed by Schlesinger, we assess at \$5.95 — well below the book's market price. □