

commitment to such timeless patterns and thus expresses his confidence in the meaningfulness of all of life, including that outside of ritual. Of course, when faith and commitment wane, the stateliness of ritual seems nothing but arbitrary artifice. Rituals therefore then disappear or they survive only as degenerate relics idolatrously valued for their own sake, not as reflections of a deeper reality. Divorced from any perception of the supraworldly, rituals may even come to destroy rather than sanction the meaningfulness of life: certain strands of both existentialism and Eastern philosophy, for example, use their shared denial of the transcendent as a basis for justifying and even ritualizing suicide.

Indeed, in his novel *Rituals* Cees Nooteboom depicts with telling precision the sterility of rituals in the self-destructive lives of a stern existentialist and his recluse son, an Orientalist. Against these two foils, however, appears the protagonist Inni, who rejects not only their self-referential rituals, but all rituals suggesting order. Inni, in fact, re-



peatedly compares the existentialist's house to a "monastery" that "still smacked of church" and sees the son's presuicide tea ritual as a "last supper" officiated by "a Catholic after all." Inni peremptorily dismisses Christian faith, too, of course, despising the "masochistic son of the cruel

Western god." He finds his own blasphemously irreligious religion upon the "soft, round rock" of a woman; sex being his principal ritual. And since he believes in no cosmic pattern, perceiving the universe as a "be-loved" but "never acceptable" chaos, his ritual is chaotic, kinky, and promiscuous. Sex, the protagonist assures the reader, is not the object, "merely the delicious vehicle" for putting us in more immediate contact with the pos-



ited disorder. Like other modernists, Inni consequently finds all orderliness "frightening," resents people who give "precise answers," and hates "systems." The void is not terrifying but actually kind of cozily reassuring to a character or author trying to justify aimless hedonism.

If talent were the only measure of literary excellence, then the Mobil Corporation's decision to award their Pegasus Award for foreign literature to this work might perhaps be comprehensible. However, the vision guiding the talent must also be considered, and Nooteboom's vision is deeply suspect. Certainly, the prevalence of the values Nooteboom celebrates could only mean the demise of the socioeconomic order permitting Mobil to exist. Having apparently lost their grip on the larger patterns of meaning, having surrendered control of a portion of their resources to an "independent"

awards committee, Mobil's executives seem intent upon updating and Westernizing the ancient Oriental ritual of hara-kiri. (BC) □

## Of Spys and Cynics

**Ian Bush: *The Siberian Reservoir***; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

It used to be that the reader could depend on spy novels to have several specific characteristics: 1) they were usually quickly and easily read; 2) they had readily identifiable good guys and bad guys; and 3) they invariably had a definite ending—the top-secret papers were retrieved, the President's life was saved, etc. The above assumptions should no longer be made automatically; by the time the reader finishes *The Siberian Reservoir* all three have been disproved. This book is one part biological thriller, one part spy novel, and one part cynical nonideology. Set in 1969, it unfolds a tale of a Soviet-developed "winning disease" discovered by genetically altering the common flu virus. This altered virus is to be unleashed on both China and the United States by way of infected pigs; it will supposedly disable both nations completely over a period of time, and it will be virtually undetectable as a foreign plot. Technological detail abounds; it is both tiresome and incomprehensible to the nonscientific reader. The spy-novel segments offer the standard fare of safe houses, "covers," "tails," strategies, hairbreadth escapes, plots, counterplots, and interrogations—often brutal ones.

But it is Dr. Bush's treatment of both the CIA and the KGB that causes puzzlement. As he sees it, the CIA is peopled mostly with incompetent recipients of the

spoils system—leavened only here and there by men of skill, honor, and integrity. The primary worthiness of the American protagonists is that, although still employed by the CIA, they have essentially eschewed real spying in favor of science. Their days of active covert missions ended after World War II, a time when apparently it was ideologically acceptable to be an intelligence agent. These two shining white knights are forced to elude not just KGB operators but their own CIA and FBI people as well.

The KGB fares no better at the hands of Dr. Bush, but a rather curious shift in attitude occurs. At first, the Soviet agents are mostly vicious thugs with varying degrees of skill and perception. By the end, when KGB and Communist Party bigwigs are debating what to do about the U.S. knowledge of the Soviets' "winning disease," at least two of the group become exemplars of conscience. They order the "accidental" death of the scientist who developed the insidious strategy and proceed to use whatever means are necessary to defuse the dilemma and to insure that it never happens again. The implication is clear: although they want to win, it must be done at least semihonorably and not at *any* cost. In light of the Soviet "yellow rain" that drenches Cambodian peasants, such an assumption seems naive, not to mention absurd.

After the American hero is forced to retire and the communist henchmen return to their pursuit of the propagation of merciful Marxism, the reader is left to wonder if the two superpower intelligence agencies are really all that different. According to Dr. Bush, they are both filled with bad guys, the only gradation being that some are "badder" than others. *The Siberian Reservoir* seems to be more a novel of cynicism than one of suspense. (RW) □

# The Question Always With Us

***The Year of Living Dangerously***; Written by David Williamson, Peter Weir, and C.J. Koch (from the novel by C. J. Koch); Directed by Peter Weir; MGM/UA Entertainment Co.

*What Is to be Done?* was published by Leo Tolstoy in 1884. The question is repeated by a dwarf; the fictional time and place are 1965 in Jakarta, Indonesia. The dwarf and the question made manifest were captured by Australian director Peter Weir in 1982. Weir's film *The Year of Living Dangerously* appears in many American theaters in 1983. What is to be done? Nearly 100 years after Tolstoy's formulation through the New Testament, 20 years after the repetition by the dwarf, the question remains to be answered. Peter Weir doesn't provide a solution, but he portrays the question more effectively than Richard Attenborough does in *Gandhi*, which essentially deals with the same concern. The implied object of the question is, of course, "for the poor." *Living Dangerously* operates on a number of levels. On one, the question of the poor is treated on a broad social scale. However, Weir doesn't succumb to the panoramic; he makes the question concrete by individualizing it: he shows the death of a single infant whose mother, like her peers on the edge of destitution, treats contaminated water as potable. One solution that is commonly offered up in the Third World—as shown in the film—for dirty water and little rice is communist revolution. Guns are shipped in; revolutionaries rise against Sukarno; the revolt fails. It isn't an answer; if it had succeeded it would have been, at best, a temporary palliative. In Weir's view, the people involved weren't driven by ideology but by hunger pains. Weir—think of his *Gallipoli*—isn't particularly enamored of Western colonialists, either. The Westerners shown in *Living Dangerously* are journalists and diplomats. With one exception, the jour-



nalists are "ugly." Westerners who are concerned with filing a good story, eating and drinking well, and rutting. The key man at the British embassy is shown as imperialists often are: treating the local people like animals and blowing on a bagpipe while feeding his overfed party guests oysters. While these characters may simply be considered to be caricatures, it must be kept in mind that a caricature must be based on identifiable characteristics. Such people, it's implied in the film, cannot or will not provide an answer.

Another level concerns individuals and love or its lack. The dwarf loves the mother and the child, yet it—and supplemental rice and money—does not

save the infant. Sparrows still fall. A British woman, a positive character, loves the dwarf, but she cannot save him: his love for the dead child makes him, stupidly, embrace death. An Australian journalist, the exception among the boors, seemingly loves his work above all else. He cares, but still the story is the main objective. The dwarf, like a character from Durrell's *Quartet*, attempts to manipulate the Australian, to force him to love the woman. Such hubris—even if well intentioned—has just one punishment in the history of drama. Eventually the man does get his priorities in order; he and the woman leave the country. The people are still hungry. An implication that can be drawn from *Living Dangerously* is that there is no easy answer to What is to be done? With little or no genuine concern, the communists provide guns and the Westerners provide money. In the short term there may be positive results, but in the long run the answer is still elusive. Bureaucratic machinations are not enough. An answer, one found in both Western and Eastern religious traditions, is to love thy neighbor. It isn't easy to do, and material—as opposed to spiritual—failures do occur. But ultimately, perhaps, it is the only solution. Still, the magnitude of the question is such that none today will ever know the answer. (SM) □

## Two Cheers for Mediocrity

***High Road to China***; Written by Sandra Weintraub Roland and S. Lee Postin; Directed by Brian G. Hutton; Warner Bros.

One of the problems—perhaps the problem—in contemporary movie-making is that B-movies have almost entirely disappeared. B-movies were, of course, made to be cofeatures. Today, it's a rare (or porno) movie house that

shows more than one feature. Part of the cause is economic: the dramatic increase in the cost of making pictures. Since many producers have to put big bucks into a movie, they figure that the result should be a big movie, even if the entire concept is microscopic. Thus, almost every movie emerges with bleating fanfare. The cacophony is exceeded only by the banality of the productions. On the other side there are the low-low-