

out, there were those who told the truth about the terror-famine in the Ukraine: Malcolm Muggeridge, Eugene Lyons, William Henry Chamberlain, Gareth Jones. But their evidence was widely rejected because it was too unsettling. There were also those inevitable countervailing observers who said things people were much more willing to accept.

It may be that the vast majority of human beings everywhere cannot believe such horrors exist until they themselves actually experience them. If one day—God forbid—we should encounter such disasters in this land of plenty, we cannot say we were not warned repeatedly and eloquently. Robert Conquest is one of those who has strived most energetically to speak to those with ears to hear.

## Mother's Darling

by Katherine Dalton

*Enchantment* by Daphne Merkin, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; \$16.95.

Hannah Lehmann is one of six children in a wealthy, New York, Orthodox Jewish family headed by a somewhat caustic, undemonstrative mother and a father whose concern is business. Hannah is obsessed with her mother, who never loved her enough, but whom Hannah cannot leave, forgive, or stop thinking about. Years, lovers, and psychiatrists do not help her. "My mother is the source of my unease in the world," Hannah says, "and thus the only person who can make me feel at home in the world." Though it is all her mother's fault, Hannah feels she is nothing without her.

"Somewhere in this story," writes Daphne Merkin at the beginning of her novel *Enchantment*, "is a tragedy, but it is very hard to see." Too hard; for a novelist who has put her character's mind—or perhaps her own—under a microscope, the tragedy is buried so deep that the rest of us have to wonder if it's really there at all.

Merkin has taken her title from Plato—"Everything that deceives may be said to enchant"—but it is Aristotle she should be rereading. "A tragedy is

impossible without action," he wrote, and the essential plot has three essential elements to it: a reversal of circumstances, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and suffering.

*Enchantment* has only suffering—a long, articulate whine. If it's clear that life is genuinely painful for Hannah, it doesn't keep her from being endlessly irritating. I say articulate because Merkin writes well and with apparent care. There are some metaphors and thoughts that are quite lovely: "The only part of Sunday that I like is the morning; past twelve o'clock I begin to hate the day, the way in which it sags," or, "I don't suppose I'll ever use any of these items, but their arrival in the mail, packed in auspicious brown cartons, made me feel momentarily less lonely, at the end of someone else's thoughts."

But they cannot save the book. Merkin may have some gifts for observation, but she has none for plot. It may be she has abandoned plot altogether; this book is remarkable for its utter lack of it. Absolutely nothing happens; instead, Merkin has put all her eggs into one basket—character—and it's Hannah's character that must hold the reader to the book. There's nothing else, no beginning or end, no character development or progression in thinking, nor regression, even.

Merkin has very believably drawn Hannah, in monumental detail, right down to her theories about her bodily functions—revelations I could have done without. (You have to be an exceedingly good writer to overcome the gratuitous coarseness of writing about going to the bathroom.) To have created Hannah is something. For an actor, whose job is characterization, it would be everything. For a novelist, it's not nearly enough. The author has to make you want to finish the book, not just believe it. I couldn't get away from the feeling that *Enchantment* could as easily have been half as long or twice as long. When something has no beginning or end, what is it that puts boundaries around the middle? Whim? Fatigue? An editor who says, any longer and we'll have to raise the price to \$18.95? I know no more, really, about Hannah by chapter 18 than I did after chapter 2; aside from some nice lines, I'd gained no more insight into Hannah or the world or

anything else, and I hadn't been particularly entertained; surely we make the effort to read a book for one of those reasons?

A novel in which nothing happens must have a main character capable of taking center stage and holding it—in this case, 288 pages worth. But Merkin has painfully painted herself into a corner by creating a character who is complete but unsympathetic. The focus of a book has to have some strong allure, even if it's mostly demonic; Hannah I just want to shake some sense into. Past and present mingle into one great extended monologue always in the present tense. I grew desperate for any kind of action at all, anything, just not another hundred pages of lengthy ruminations on the Hannah Lehmann self.

Some of my friends liked the book better than I did. "She's peeled herself like an onion," said one who liked the book precisely for the completeness and shamelessness of Hannah's self-exposure. For me it felt like a vicarious, decade-long therapy session, and I've never been much of a fan of psychoanalysis. Merkin chronicles the details of Hannah's life indiscriminately, moving in ever smaller concentric circles, like some poor parody of Dante's hierarchy in Hell, from the petty details to the pettiest. Details are vital to any book, of course. But not every single detail that can be gleaned from scrutinizing your apartment and from thinking back over your friends' and family's lives and your own 20-odd years of experience. Merkin is guilty of the novelist's equivalent of relativism: anything—a squeezed-out tube of toothpaste, just anything—is as good as anything else, and everything is chronicled and included.

So in *Enchantment* you have every bit you'd ever want to know about an upper-class Jewish girl too weak to be evil, too self-involved and petulant to be much good. If there is one thing that made me pause when I was finishing *Enchantment*, it's what this exhaustive portrait means. All novels are to some extent autobiographical, in that writers must put something of their own lives, experiences, or observations into them, and first novels (which *Enchantment* is) are notoriously so. But any book with this precise a picture of one needlessly broken per-

sonality almost certainly has to come, and to a frightening extent, from its author's own life. In the end, what is haunting about *Enchantment* is that you can't seem to separate the dancer from the dance.

Katherine Dalton writes from New York.

## Tales Out of School

*The Big Book of Home Learning* by Mary Pride, Westchester, IL: Crossway Books; \$17.50.

For many people, education comes down to a choice between the unaffordable and the unacceptable. Home schooling is increasingly the answer for a great many beleaguered families who cannot find (or cannot pay for) private education. There are many obstacles to home schooling, but the first hurdle is probably the worst: where to begin? There is a wide variety of packaged systems and text materials, and it is difficult for the nonprofessional to make an intelligent choice. Mary Pride has made that first hurdle a great deal easier by providing a detailed and clearly written description of what's available, what it costs, and what it's supposed to do. Even parents who are content with the public or private schools to which they have dedicated their children's future will want to have this book available as an invaluable guide to educational resources. (Did you know, for example, that you can purchase a K-6 lab-science program for \$85-\$150 per grade or hard-bound children's classics for under \$4?) In the slough of books produced by evangelical publishers every year, this wonderfully useful book stands out. (TF)

## Resisting in Berlin

by Howard Sitton

*Berlin Diaries, 1940-1945* by Marie Vassiltchikov, New York: Alfred A. Knopf; \$19.95.

"The (anti-Hitler) conspiracy failed," wrote the late Willi Schlamm, himself

a refugee from Nazism, nearly 30 years ago. "But the list of names of those whom a maddened Hitler hanged after the failure reads like a *Gotha* of Germany's famous military families. . . . They are names which, if the truth indeed prevails, will join the short list of superior men who have not hesitated to choose their God over their race."

What was life like for these men in the besieged enemy capital? A young Russian émigré named Marie (Missie) Vassiltchikov, who worked for the German Foreign Office, kept a diary which tells us.

Missie's life in Berlin began well enough. In spite of somewhat straitened circumstances, the first two years of war weren't too bad. The bombing raids were numerous but caused more discomfort than dislocation.

By the end of 1943, the situation had changed markedly. Continually subjected to heavy bombing, Berlin was a shambles. Only major exertions by its inhabitants kept a patchwork civil structure functioning amid collapsing buildings, never-ending fires, and shortages of food and manpower. That this effort was made not in spite of but because of the bombing is noted:

(22 December 1943) It looks as if these ghastly raids are intended to help by breaking the Germans' morale, but I do not think that much can be achieved that way. Indeed they are having the contrary effect. For amidst such suffering and hardship . . . everyone seems intent only on patching roofs, propping up walls, cooking on an upturned electric iron, or melting snow to wash with. . . . The heroic side of human nature takes over and people are extraordinarily friendly and helpful.

As the plot comes together, the diary entries become more urgent:

(24 April 1944) Had a long talk with Loremarie Schoenburg. It is difficult for me to tell her that . . . her presence in Berlin endangers people who are far more involved in what is to come.

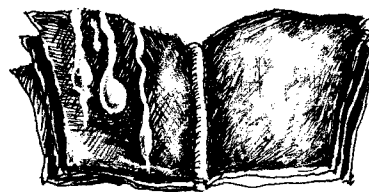
. . . and plaintive:

(16 June 1944) I often feel ashamed and frustrated at not being more deeply involved in something really worthwhile, but what can I, a foreigner, do?

. . . and telling:

(19 July 1944) The truth is that there is a fundamental difference in outlook between all of them and me: not being German, I am concerned only with the elimination of the Devil. . . . Being patriots, they want to save their country from complete destruction by setting up some interim government. I have never believed that . . . would be acceptable to the Allies, who refuse to distinguish between "good" Germans and "bad." This, of course, is a fatal mistake on their part and we will probably all pay a heavy price for it.

When the plot failed, the Nazis were furious, and the arrests began. The pressure quickly became too great, and many famous Germans (including



commanders like Rommel and von Kluge) chose suicide rather than face Gestapo "trial" and torture. It soon became imperative that those "in the know" should disperse, and Missie left Berlin in September 1944. The last months of the war she worked as a nurse in and around Vienna.

If this book seems less than analytical, one must remember that war's first casualty was *time*, to write, to think. Bombing continued night after sleepless night, and much of the days' activity was devoted to mere existence.

Missie's diary is most useful because of its vivid portrayal of wartime Berlin. It was "in the face of a Schrecklichkeit unparalleled in history" that the conspirators chose to prove their formidable courage and character.

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