

ism and kleptocracy prevail in Latin America and endorses U.S. intervention on behalf of "pro-American" regimes, the left can only support socialist and Marxist alternatives. But unless these false gods of left and right are both overturned, unless this joint left-right hegemony over political discourse is broken, monumental disaster threatens in our foreign policy and indeed in the lives of the peoples of Central America and much of the Third World. Certainly no one has a recipe for creating a truly free system in societies that have never known one. But for Americans who would help, the starting point must be rejection of political and military meddling in their affairs and, at home, repudiation of the stale political categories that have held us all hostage. □

A FLAG FOR SUNRISE, by Robert Stone. Alfred A. Knopf, 439 pp., \$13.95.

THE SAFETY NET, by Heinrich Böll. Alfred A. Knopf, 299 pp., \$13.95.

Uneasy agnostics

JOHN GORDON

NOTES FOR THE TIME CAPSULE: December 20, 1981. I write this as Vichyism is being reimposed in Poland under the sponsorship of a regime that officially believes the state will wither away shortly after its ideology triumphs universally; as the Golan Heights are being seized by order of a prime minister who believes in his nation's divine destiny to own all the land claimed in the collected press releases of an ancient tribe of nomadic shepherders; as our president, who believes that trees leak poison and that Russians eat sawdust, having been popped some months ago by a fellow who believed he would thereby win the heart of a teenaged movie star, is being guarded

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from the fabled hit squad of a man who believes himself to be the chosen vessel of Allah. My country's foreign policy is in the hands of a man who believes that sinister forces erase tapes and that American nuns in Central America carry weapons under their habits; its economy is largely in the hands of a young man who has publicly acknowledged that only an ignoramus would believe in the prospects for the program he is putting into effect; its land is in the hands of a man who believes that his Maker is coming any day now and that it would be a shame not to chew up as much territory as possible before D-day. If I turn for solace to that weekly anodyne, the *Sunday Times*, I can choose between the op-ed page, there to receive counsel from a man, William Safire, who believes in the integrity of Richard Nixon, or the book review section, the cover of which features a flattering picture of a woman, Adrienne Rich, who is on record as believing that all males are child molesters. When I talk to our hope for the future, the college students I teach, I find that they believe mainly in a mushy idea of Providence and that the more raffish among them are intrigued by the doctrines of defunct punkers, who believed in impaling themselves with safety pins, and of the Rastafarians, who believed in the immortality of Haile Selassie. Then he died. They still believe in it.

When men cease to believe in God, Chesterton observed, the problem is not that they will believe in nothing, but that they will believe in anything. In these two surreal, somber novels, Heinrich Böll (winner of the Nobel Prize) and Robert Stone (author of *The Dog Soldiers*, which won, and deserved, the National Book Award in 1975) both attempt to educate their readers away from such seductions. Both novels are epistemologically panoramic, scrutinizing the condition of the modern world by means of a narrator who confidently snakes in and out of

the minds of a large cast of thinking characters, gauging their baffled attempts to make the world about them cohere. Both are political novels, concerned mainly with that region of politics that intersects with morals, and both repose, ultimately, on an uneasy agnosticism, as articulated by spiritually exhausted protagonists who find themselves forced to maneuver through particularly nasty microcosms of the modern world.

In *A Flag for Sunrise*, that microcosm is Tecan, a Central American banana-company satrapy whose greedhead generalissimos, having discovered exportable minerals beneath the dirt farms of their peasants, have in effect destabilized the countryside, with the by now familiar consequences: massacres, guerrillas, the threat of revolution, the CIA. The evocation of this place in all its dolorous sordor, its impasto of Graham Greene, Franz Kafka, Horace Walpole, and the "CBS Evening News," is a splendid accomplishment. The airport features a sign "that marked off the number of days since the last fatal accident" on the theory that Americans will find this reassuring ("They were always picking up North American public relations notions and getting them slightly wrong"); an upper-crust party is "like a Dracula movie but without the class"; the military ruler keeps a pet albino dwarf who chews off the private parts of political enemies; a leper, for a joke, wears a "Kiss me" T-shirt; the local agent of the *Guardia Nacional*, who has a corpse in his freezer, demands absolution at gunpoint from an alcoholic priest, who is harboring a murderer of children.

Stone's Tecan is a tangle of true believers and embodied appetites spitting dogmas, curses, and bullets at one another, a maze through which the galumphing middle-aged protagonist, Frank Holliwell, while drinking too much and thinking too much, doing and pretending not to do the CIA's

business, strews his trail of crumbs. Everyone in the novel is given his or her day in court, even the *Guardia* agent with the corpse in his freezer, even the amphetamine-besotted psychopath on whose frazzled impulses the novel's denouement—and Tecan's future—come to depend.

IS THERE A MORAL? PERHAPS a provisional one, as delivered by Holliwell near the end of the book, remembering his Vietnam background and applying it to the events in Tecan:

Apparently it was his fate to witness popular wars; Vietnam had been a popular war among his radical friends. As a witness to that popular war he had seen people on both sides act bravely and have their moments. Popular wars, thrilling as they might be to radicals, were quite as shitty as everything else but like certain thrilling, unperfected operas—like everything else, in fact—they had their moments. People's moments did not last long.

As Vietnam is to the events of *A Flag for Sunrise*, so is the Third Reich to the events of Heinrich Böll's *The Safety Net*—the memory in relation to which all that happens in the present is aftermath. The setting is contemporary West Germany against the backdrop of "the total destruction of all values by Nazism," a Germany in which prominent industrialists are the special targets of terrorists. The "safety net" of the title—no connection to the Reaganite coining—is the security network of police protecting the lives of Fritz Tolm, newspaper magnate, and his far-flung, frequently suspect family. The net is necessary because of the dumb, crummy, lost war with which Tolm, like Holliwell, will always be associated. Because of that event, Tolm finds himself, in his sixties, looking out like Macbeth on a landscape in which not only the young but the very woods seem marching on him in Oedipal wrath, and any bird might be a flying bomb:

Presumably it was possible to develop remote control mechanical birds which, filled with high explosives, would suddenly switch to horizontal flight and fly through an open window bearing havoc in their artificial breasts, in their artificial bellies. With the exception, he supposed, of swallows, sparrows, crows. But pigeons, perhaps, starlings, storks, and wild geese—whole flights, all mechanical, all bearing havoc, and he found himself saying, to Bleibl of all people: "Even the birds of the air aren't to be trusted anymore."

The "safety net" of the title is multiply significant: Tolm's terrorist ene-

mies are also a net (they control the birds and the children), as is his family, as is the structure of the book, which throughout shunts from one center of consciousness to another among an extraordinarily intricate and complex network of characters: about a hundred important names in fewer than 300 pages, each with his or her own center of integrity. There is little narrative, virtually no lyricism or narrative editorializing, nothing but ganglia and the synapses between them, closing or not closing: one revenant after another after another, tenuously webbed together according to rules which for some reason require that some shall seek to destroy the others. As in *A Flag for Sunrise*, there is no commanding center—only the brain's deranged circuitry.

Frank Holliwell and the generation of Americans he represents may think that Vietnam was disillusioning, but when it comes to disillusionment, *The Safety Net* shows that Europe remains the varsity. The Americans of Stone's novel think that they have looked into the depths when they have encountered the corrupt junta and renegade priests of their undistinguished little grungehole; Fritz Tolm by contrast takes for granted the possibility that his eight-year-old grandson may have been trained to butt him to death with his head.

The news notwithstanding, my students continue to believe in Providence—as do I, I suppose, and as do most of us. So did the traditional novel, for a long time; most people's idea of a well-done novel is still one that demonstrates convincingly that the way things are shown to work out is the way they *had* to work out. Now here come these two novels—both of them moving, powerful, well crafted, and depressing as all hell—with their blurry borders, their dissonant medley of voices, their rooted distrust of anyone's connection of "is" with "ought" or "ought" with "must," to remind us of how fictional are such fictions. At a time when this country's most vocal true believers are busily convincing one another that nuclear war, if it comes, will have been inevitable and therefore Providential, part of God's holy plan for mankind, such negations of purpose can seem awfully close to sanity.

It is now December 21, the first day of winter, four days before Christmas, and the news is pretty much the same. Ho ho ho. □

THE GRAVES OF ACADEME, by Richard Mitchell. Little, Brown, 256 pp., \$10.95.

Who's teaching the teachers?

SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD

IF YOU WANT TO DISCOVER, IN a concise, learned, and delightful way, why the American system of public education is rotten to the core, you'll have to read Richard Mitchell's *The Graves of Academe*. Mitchell does in one fell swoop what many of us have been trying to do in a dozen scattered shots: explain convincingly why our schools are in the mess they are. He succeeds because he himself comes from the source of the pestilence—the teachers colleges. Thus he can state with first-hand knowledge what the rest of us have only been able to infer: that American teacher education is at the heart of the problem.

Richard Mitchell comes to his subject with some very special credentials. He is a professor of English at Glassboro State College, the New Jersey campus where a once famous but forgettable summit meeting between Lyndon Johnson and Aleksei Kosygin took place. He is also the writer and publisher of the *Underground Grammarian*, a kind of samizdat publication that reaches the outside world from Gulag Academica, giving us a harrowing look into what is going on in the insulated domain of teacher training. As a dissident, Mitchell displays all of the characteristics we have come to associate with that condition; he writes with indignation, sarcasm, wit, humor, despair, and the sense of being trapped among the enemy.

Originally, he created the *Underground Grammarian* in 1976 as a vehicle for exposing and ridiculing "examples of jargon, faulty syntax, redundancy, needless neologism, and any other kind of outrage against English" of which the educationists were guilty. Pretty soon he was paying special heed to the productions of the American

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