



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Fiddlers Before the Flood

THERE has been a good deal of melodrama in almost every novel Robert Penn Warren has written, from *Night Rider* (1938) on. But usually there has been much more than melodrama. Although his best-known novel, *All the King's Men*, contains melodramatic elements, one remembers it as a shrewd study of politics and a confrontation of serious philosophical questions. With regard to some of his later books, especially *Band of Angels* and *The Cave*, some critics have felt that melodrama has taken over, but it has seemed to me that most of the time it is kept under control and is made to serve a valid literary purpose, just as is melodrama in Shakespeare's tragedies. About Warren's new novel, *Flood* (Random House, \$5.95), I am not so sure.

The story is laid in a small town in Tennessee named Fiddlersburg, which is living its last days before the water rising behind a new dam inundates it. Bradwell Tolliver, a native of the town but lately a successful script writer in Hollywood, is asked by a famous director, Yasha Jones, to work on a film about the death of the community. Tolliver has a sister, Maggie Fiddler, who lives in the old Fiddler house with her mother-in-law. Other characters are soon brought on stage, and the various complexities of the story begin to develop.

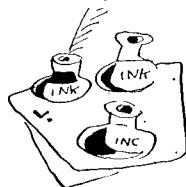
Tolliver belongs to a species in which Warren has always been interested—the hard-bitten, wise-cracking young man who is in fact deeply troubled by his inadequacies and his failures to come to terms with the world. Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* is the prime example; but Slim Sarrett in *At Heaven's Gate* and Isaac Sumter in *The Cave* have some of the characteristics.

By means of an intricate series of

flashbacks we are made acquainted with Tolliver's life. His father was a tough and uncouth individual who made a lot of money and bought up most of Fiddlersburg, including the Fiddler mansion. Brad's closest companion in boyhood was a Huck Finn from the swamp, Frog-Eye, who grew up to be "the only free man left." Later, in defiance of his father, Brad went to college, became interested in writing, published a collection of short stories, mostly about Fiddlersburg, and left college to devote himself to literature. He fell in love with an upper-class Communist, Lettice, married her after taking part in the Spanish Civil War, and went to live in Fiddlersburg while he worked on a novel. Meanwhile his sister Maggie had married Dr. Calvin Fiddler. After his marriage with Lettice had broken up, Brad went to Hollywood and did well.

We are told less about Yasha Jones, but there are some episodes from his past, particularly experiences as an OSS spy in occupied France. Jones is presented as a true artist and a man of integrity, a contrast to confused and cynical Brad Tolliver. He has been married, but lost his wife in a tragic accident which has left him with a sense of guilt.

Maggie becomes more and more important as the book proceeds. First we learn that her husband is serving a life sentence in a nearby penitentiary, and then we discover that he shot a man he believed to be Maggie's lover. These



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events are presented in an ingenious way, partly through Brad's recollections, partly through the transcript of Dr. Fiddler's trial, and partly through the story Maggie tells Yasha Jones.

There are other themes: the story of Pretty-Boy, the Negro murderer who refuses to pray; various incidents directly connected with the flooding of the town; Tolliver's strange adventure with a blind girl, and his surprising encounter with a gas station attendant. The novel also introduces a lawyer, a relative of Brad's, who is almost as garrulous as Faulkner's Gavin Stevens.

The story moves slowly towards its climax. We know that Maggie and Yasha are spending much time together.

er, and we gather that they are falling in love. We also know that Dr. Fiddler once escaped from the penitentiary, and that, though normally a quiet man, he is capable of violence. So we are not surprised when he breaks loose and confronts Maggie, Yasha, and Brad. It would not be fair to tell what happens then, and in any case I should find it embarrassing to describe the episode, one that Brad Tolliver, in his capacity as script writer, would have been ashamed to use in a Grade B movie. Thereafter Warren ties up the loose ends with his usual dexterity.

Architecturally the novel is admirable: Warren tells a complicated story and tells it in a complicated way, with many flashbacks and constant changes in point of view, but he is always in control. It must also be said that there are many good passages: the scene at the penitentiary, with the discursive deputy warden; Brad's humiliation by the gas-station attendant; Brother Potts and Pretty-Boy; some episodes in the domestic life of Brad and Lettice. Warren still knows how to write and how to put a novel together.

AND yet, as I have intimated, the novel is a disappointment, and not merely because of the melodramatic climax. It is a novel about self-discovery. Yasha, I take it, understands himself pretty well in the beginning, but he finds fulfillment with Maggie and brings her to maturity. The events of the story lead Brad to a badly needed understanding of himself, and they enlighten Dr. Fiddler. Even Lettice, we learn from her letter to Maggie, has found herself in the church; and the Negro gas-station attendant has his bitter moment of revelation.

This is a respectable subject for a novel, though scarcely an original one; but the trouble is that the principal characters do not have reality enough to give significance to their self-discoveries. Yasha is almost purely synthetic, and Brad, though he is less skeletal, seems put together according to a formula Warren developed long ago. It is, of course, true that characters in melodrama tend to become one-dimensional if not actually types, and the question one has to ask is whether Warren has not been playing around with melodrama too long. Not only is the climax a gigantic cliché, as I have indicated; many of the subordinate episodes suggest instalments of a TV serial. I am sure the book will be popular, and heaven knows it is easy to read; but I at least cannot say of it, as I have said of almost every other novel Warren has written, that, whatever the devices it employs, it has something of importance to tell us. —GRANVILLE HICKS.

Who's Running the Country?

By HANS J. MORGENTHAU, *Albert A. Michelson Distinguished Service Professor of political science and modern history at the University of Chicago.*

WHO GOVERNS us? Most certainly, it is not the people, you and I and the man next door. We do not participate in the decision as to whether the war in Vietnam should be expanded, continued on its present scale, or liquidated, or whether the Civil Rights Bill should contain a public accommodations clause and how far it should go. "Government by the people," in the sense in which democratic folklore thinks of it, is an illusion, and it has always been one, short of the rare instances of direct democracy where the Aristotelian requirement of face-to-face relations among the citizens could be fulfilled. Men have always been governed by elites, that is, by minorities who have a special claim or a special ability to govern.

What distinguishes a democratic elite from others is its responsiveness to public opinion. In a democracy, the ruling elite is confirmed in power, or else replaced by a new one, by the majority of the citizens in periodic elections. Thus an elite must rule in accordance with the preferences of the majority of the citizens if it wants to keep itself in power. Democracy, then, is distinguished from other forms of government not because the people rule but because elites rule with the consent of the people.

The reality, however, is more complicated than that. For our society contains elites that govern without being accountable to the citizenry and use the elected representatives of the people to do their bidding. These representatives, instead of being responsive to the preferences of the people, become the tools of hidden or half-hidden rulers, and the democratic process becomes distorted and corrupted.

Traditionally, we have considered certain economic interests to be our hidden rulers. In the nineteenth century it was the bankers, the utilities, the railroads, and the "trusts" in general. Since the beginning of the twentieth century it has been an article of faith among us that our Latin American policy has been "dollar diplomacy,"

i.e., determined by and pursued on behalf of private commercial interests. (How often have I not been asked, with the expectation of an affirmative answer, whether our Middle Eastern policy was determined by the oil interests!) After the First World War, it was the "munitions makers" and the House of Morgan, for the sake of whose investments our government was supposed to have intervened in that war. Fascism and Marxism have elaborated on the theme, and it is a basic tenet of their philosophies that parliamentary democracy is a sham manipulated by economic forces for their interests. The "warmongers of Wall Street" have become standard equipment in communist propaganda.

In our day, two new elites have risen to prominence, baffling and disquieting us: the military and the scientists. Of the two, the military baffle us less. For from the beginning of the Republic we have regarded them with misgivings as a threat to democratic government, and they fit easily into the stereotype of our political folklore as the highly effective and virtually unassailable manipulators of our seemingly democratic institutions. As such, they simply take the place of the economic elites of the past. The "merchants of death" of forty years ago have been succeeded by the "purveyors of death" or a combination of the two. That kind of argument has the additional advantage of requiring but a minimum of intellectual effort. You just substitute one devil for another, and while you cannot tell what to do about him, you have at least the satisfaction of knowing who he is.

TRISTRAM COFFIN's *The Passion of the Hawks: Militarism in Modern America* (Macmillan, \$5.95) and John M. Swomley, Jr.'s *The Military Establishment* (Beacon, \$6) embrace the "devil" theory of the military. Coffin does it with unrestrained gusto, while Swomley looks at the military with the distaste and the premonitions of the pacifist. Neither author seems to be aware of the similarity of his method of argument to that of all witch-hunters, whether of Right or Left: to personify unintelligible and unmanageable substantive problems and to generalize from isolated experiences. Some retired officers indeed play a prominent role in ultra-Rightist organizations, as do business