

The Day the World Turns Grey

The Ice Saints, by Frank Tuohy (Scribners. 245 pp. \$4.50), and *The Lamp Post*, by Martin Gregor-Dellin, translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston (Knopf. 238 pp. \$4.95), depict the moral dilemma of men caught between integrity and expediency in a totalitarian society. William S. Lynch was formerly professor of humanities at Cooper Union.

By WILLIAM S. LYNCH

THESE two books bear a striking resemblance to each other, partly because both are set behind the Iron Curtain: *The Ice Saints* in Poland, *The Lamp Post* in East Germany.

Beyond that, however, is the common mood, grim and harsh, completely without laughter or joy, a terrible testimony to what life must be like in the satellite countries. By their similarity they bear witness to the validity of what they describe. Neither of them could have been written except by men who have actually lived in the countries of which they write. Frank Tuohy has lived in Poland; Martin Gregor-Dellin fled to the Western Zone of Germany in 1955 and won the East German Literary Prize in 1963 for *The Lamp Post*.

Says one of Tuohy's characters, "I remember how we found one day that the whole world had turned grey, grey streets, grey houses, grey faces, grey

girls . . . the greyness has gotten into everything." Grey is truly the word to describe the environment and the people reflected by these two authors.

The "ice saints" are St. Pancras, St. Servace, and St. Boniface, whose days are those chill, weeping ones of early May which remind us that all is by no means well with the year. Frank Tuohy chooses them as the patrons of his story of the visit of a young Englishwoman to her sister, married to a Communist Pole. The purpose of the visit involves an inheritance left to the sister's son, Tadeusz, who is caught in the toils of an upbringing that would spoil him for the kind of life he would have if he were brought to England. His father, a second-rate scholar, hopes for an important post in the local university; meanwhile he and his wife eke out a living through tutoring and translating. Advancement in his world is achieved not through scholarly effort and classroom ability, but through Party maneuvering and political machination. Anything as suspicious as a family inheritance can only be a stumbling block to a man in his position.

His sister-in-law Rose becomes involved with other Poles, and even has a love affair with one; for a time this relationship alters her view of the country in which she is a stranger. When she is leaving, she looks back at a friend, standing in his pale raincoat behind a wire fence, and "beyond him a whole landscape waiting for explanation."

The Lamp Post evokes the same mood. Here is another intellectual, this

time a teacher in East Germany, trying to walk the tightrope of expediency.

Blumentritt, once a prisoner of the Nazis, falls afoul of the Communists. Haunted by the memory of a hanging he had once seen on the lamp post outside his window, he applies for a change of residence. This request is enough to evoke suspicion; he is beset on the one hand by the inquisitors, who try to prove him disloyal to the state, and on the other by those who wish to use him as a propaganda tool. Like Witold Rudowski in *The Ice Saints*, he is caught between conformity and integrity.

These are tragedies, both of them, inviting comparison with Kafka and Gogol. The struggles of ordinary mortals to cling to the shreds of decency in the grey gloom of an authoritarian world are reflected with sadness and horror. It takes no strong imagination to identify oneself with the characters; frail like the rest of us, they make us wonder how we would stand up to the trials they must undergo.

Snakes in the Temple: Bypassing place and time, Robert Laxalt's extended parable, *A Man in the Wheatfield* (Harper & Row, \$3.95), is set in an America that is not America, in a moment that has always been and is yet to be. Like all parables, it is simple, graceful, exemplary. But that last quality is its undoing.

The one "alien" in a nameless Western town cut off from the rest of America by the desert that surrounds it and by the old-country Italians who populate it is Smale Calder, a taciturn American who keeps rattlesnakes in a rock labyrinth behind his gas station. To his townsmen Calder's public communion with the serpents is a multitude of things—threat, challenge, spectacle, aphrodisiac. And to Father Savio Lazzaroni, who confuses symbol with reality, it is a ceremony of evil.

There is the basis of fine moral fable here, in the intertwined crises provoked by Calder's strange practice. One huge rattler, lying ominously aloof in the depths of its stone temple, is a symbolic reflection of Lazzaroni, who clings to the gloomed sanctuary of his church to preach malice against the compassionate keeper of serpents. In an apocalyptic final scene, during which the snake pen is drenched with gasoline and set afire by the aroused townspeople, both priest and serpent emerge from their coiled celibacy to strike with deadly passion at the desolated Calder, the snake's scorched agony implying the fires of self-recognition suddenly aflame within the priest.

By this time, however, the book is also in mortal trouble, its vitality smothering beneath a burden of homiletic events. When a harmless combat between rattlesnakes is presented, it is followed



Frank Tuohy—"sadness."



Martin Gregor-Dellin—"horrors."

immediately—as if the implications might be missed—by an account of a homicidal barroom brawl. Nor is this the end; the lesson about human beings is summarized for us by Calder: “If there was nothing to stop them, I guess they’d kill every time.” On behalf of literature, the same must be said of such passages.

And too often Laxalt’s symbols exist by assertion only. A child sits in the street burning ants, the charred insects and matches strewn around him. “It was curiously like a graveyard,” says the narrative voice. No. Not even that apologetic “curiously” can save a strained observation. It may seem unfair to insist upon convincing detail in a parable. But since the author has chosen to present his story in a realistic manner, it is the method itself that insists.

Mr. Laxalt’s prose is spare and strong. And he has an impressive talent for fusing experiences, so that a diversity of events are at the same time one event. Now if only he’d come down from that pulpit. . . .

—ARTHUR EDELSTEIN.

Problems Besides Sex: “A boy’s will is the wind’s will,/And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.” The poem by Longfellow from which Gerald Warner Brace derives his title, *The Wind’s Will* (Norton, \$4.50), is old-fashioned, and so, in one sense, is the novel. A story of a boy during a crucial summer in his life between high school and college, it includes no rapes, rumbles, or juvenile riots. The language is restrained rather than violent; symbols are few and plain. The setting, a Maine village, is a rural backwater. The protagonist, David Wayne, survives a good deal of battering by selfish adults, and cramping by a narrow environment, without being hopelessly wounded.

If the novel is in these matters old-fashioned, it is by no means sugary. The boy’s sexual adventures are honestly, if not clinically, presented—and sex is not his only problem. It would be a serious handicap to any youth to have Amasa Wayne for a father: a preacher of hell-fire-and-damnation, a self-dramatizing tyrant at home, a man whose own lusts destroy him at last. It would be easy for any seventeen-year-old to hate such a father, easy for a novelist to make a stereotyped hypocrite of him or a mere buffoon. Instead, while focusing on David’s point of view and his mingled feelings of awe, shame, fear, and pity, Mr. Brace with great skill and economy develops the man’s character in depth. David’s position is effectively contrasted with that of his brother, Simon, an impulsive extrovert who has solved the problem of Father by running away; and with that of his mother, whose sensibilities have been bludgeoned into passive resignation.

David himself is a convincing individual, comparable to many another found in college freshman classes. Mr. Brace knows youth, and has been a successful novelist of family life and life in rural Maine. *The Wind’s Will* should add to his reputation as a writer of insight and discrimination.

—ELIZABETH L. MANN.

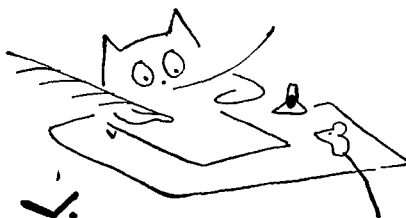
To Be or Not to Be: Life is obviously a bowl of the very best cherries for John Sayer, the hero of Jerome Weidman’s *Word of Mouth* (Random House, \$5.95) until he becomes involved with a group doing a musical comedy based on the life of his late father, the famous trust-buster and founder of a Utopian colony, and John is forced to dredge up a past he cannot face.

Given a solid plot idea and the well-known talents of Jerome Weidman, one expects something more than the fiasco that *Word of Mouth* turns out to be. We begin with John Sayer racing down a highway determined to commit suicide. Will he or won’t he? To find out, the reader must go through an entire novel built of flashbacks, which always seem to end leaving another question to be answered somewhere up ahead. In order to give John someone to flashback with on his suicide drive the author has even gone so far as to disinter that old wheeze Hollywood abandoned some twenty years ago, the celestial messenger come to earth to seek out a soul in trouble (remember Claude Rains walking through a heaven of dry-ice smoke in *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*?).

Characterizations in the novel are of two types: outrageous caricature for the theatrical *personae*, flat, dull portrayal for the rest. Special notice must be made of John Sayer. The author presents him as a successful, happy human being in both his business and marital life, despite the fact that John Sayer is impotent with his wife and so mentally disturbed that his mind blots out completely anything it finds uncomfortable to remember.

Jerome Weidman already has a string of best-sellers and a Pulitzer Prize (for the musical comedy *Fiorello!*) to his credit. Aside from the possibility of a membership in the National Association of Manufacturers, I doubt if he can look to *Word of Mouth* to bring him any further honors.

—HASKEL FRANKEL.



Music to My Ears

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thoroughgoing rehearsal, of which, of course, there was no evidence. Flagello’s voice proved remarkably adaptable to the requirements of the role, in which he is now more adept vocally than dramatically. It lacks the kind of weight that one associates with the sage of the Garter, nor is it quite the “vecchio John” the text prompts him to say in self-description. Miss Scovotti could be a commendable Nanetta, but this is hardly as interchangeable a part as Musetta in *Bohème*. In consequence, some of her phrases with Fenton (Luigi Alva) were less than unified and the laughter in which the wives indulge (musically) was more raucous than Verdi intended. Raina Kabaivanska is better suited to lyric roles such as Alicia of this opera than to Desdemona, but her sound still tends to penetrate rather than blend. On the other hand, none of Frank Guarrera’s vocal limitations detract from the fine figure of a Ford he added to the dramatic picture.

In the *Figaro*, it was Rosenstock himself who was making a first venture in this theater, though the work had served for his City Center debut a full fifteen years ago. It gave promise of happy things to come in a well-phrased overture, but he soon encountered difficulties not of his own making—wrong entrances, squawks from the horns rather than musical tones, etc. Perhaps later audiences will profit from what was, in the aggregate, a public rehearsal, but the one that had attended this “first performance” had justice for complaint.

Good enough to keep and cherish was Teresa Stratas’s Cherubino, appealing to the eye and caressing to the ear. She has a likable concept of the role and delivers it with appropriate spirit. Whether Hermann Prey’s lyric sound is sufficient for a Metropolitan Almaviva was neither proven nor disproven on this occasion. He looks well and adds some of a spoiled aristocratic quality to the drama; but he tends to fade from hearing in the ensembles. Cesare Siepi tried valiantly, though less than successfully, to cope with the high notes of Figaro’s part, but performed well otherwise. Judith Raskin, Lisa Della Casa, and Gladys Kriesle (Marcellina) were the other ladies of the cast, in which Elfego Esparza as Bartolo and Mariano Caruso as Basilio were new to this stage. The exposure should be of benefit for them. It was a welcome sign of a directorial second thought that the laundry hung up to dry in Susanna’s room was, this time, a neat array of lace handkerchiefs rather than the former miscellany of intimate apparel. Of such details is progress compounded.

—IRVING KOLODIN.