

A Rage for Right

The Fanatic, by Meyer Levin (Simon & Schuster. 478 pp. \$5.95), portrays a playwright's obsessive fight for justice against overwhelming odds. SR columnist Haskel Frankel has worked in and written for the theatre and television.

By HASKEL FRANKEL

THOUGH Meyer Levin has twelve books to his credit, he is most remembered for *Compulsion*, his fictionalized retelling of the Leopold-Loeb case. Quite likely next year will find him still remembered as the author of *Compulsion* despite the fact that *The Fanatic* is much the richer reading experience of the two books. I do not say it is the better book. *Compulsion* is, in that it set out to tell a corking good story that would keep the reader wanting to know what happens next, told its story, and ended. If the reader had the background to be able to substitute real names for those of Judd Steiner, Artie Straus, and others who figured in the crime and the trial, it brought an added fillip to the reading, but it wasn't necessary. *Compulsion* stood firmly on its own as a fictional crime story.

The Fanatic is not so neat a package. Since Meyer Levin is an excellent storyteller, there is a strong central plot line. However, the novel does not end there. "It is essential to me," the author states in a foreword to the novel, "that the reader approach the story to seek ideas, meanings, beliefs. . . ." It is a request that need not be made. Mr. Levin is not a writer of subtleties.

His latest novel is concerned with a slim volume entitled *Good and Evil*, written by Leo Kahn, a young man destroyed in a Nazi death camp. The fanatic of the title is Maury Finklestein, an American rabbi turned playwright, who wants to bring Leo Kahn's work to the stage. When the book that no one was anxious to publish turns into a world-wide best-seller, commercial and political forces move in against the unknown playwright to disassociate him from Kahn's writing and to make the play serve private purposes. Maury's obsessive fight for justice against overwhelming odds damages every part of his life—his health, his marriage, even the second play he has written. (Note: Should anyone miss the Biblical para-



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ble implied in the too-altruistic rabbi's struggle against the unrelentingly destructive forces lined up against him, Maury's second play is entitled *Job*.)

It will be a dense reader indeed who does not find a parallel in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Mr. Levin's foreword, with its overemphasis that *The Fanatic* is fiction (with a springboard from fact), only reinforces the idea. Anyone who cares for literary sleuthing need only search the theatrical columns for the years 1955 through 1957 to discover reports of battles between Mr. Levin and the producers of the plays *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Compulsion*. Cast and production credits on both plays make it easy for those who choose to do so to substitute names in the text of *The Fanatic*. Indeed, in the case of certain characters, it is difficult not to do.

Mr. Levin's novel, like most things large and powerful in this world, must pay for its size with a loss of pace. Often, the downhill plunge of Maury Finklestein comes to a jarring halt while the author sends questions to the heavens, lets fly a poisoned arrow from his private quiver, or leaps across half the world to examine an event that will be needed later on in his story. Whereas in *Compulsion* he created a sympathetic character with whom one could identify and follow comfortably throughout

the nightmare story, the reader of *The Fanatic* finds no such guide to warm up to. Leo Kahn is a voice from beyond the grave; he is a *dybbuk*—the spirit of a dead man who has entered a living body—and there can be no identification with him. (Note: Should anyone have missed this fusion of European Jewish folklore to modern story telling, Mr. Levin has Leo brand himself a *dybbuk* on the last page.) And the closer Maury's fanaticism takes him to madness, the more alien he becomes so that the reader pulls back and watches rather than identifies with him. Despite the fact that his cause is just, he grates on the mind like the buzz of a housefly which cannot be caught, or like one note on a piano struck over and over again.

These are flaws to be noted, but they are as unimportant as scratches on a treasure chest. *The Fanatic* is a big book in every sense of the word. If it is a little too big for its own good, such a complaint is so rare these days that it must be regarded as a compliment.

Computer God and True Believers:

If Billy Brown, narrator-protagonist of Warren Miller's *Looking for the General* (McGraw-Hill, \$4.95), is mad (which explains the parenthetical "ho, ho's" and other seemingly pointless stylistic elaborations) it is our world that has made him so.

As a physicist working on a top-secret Air Force project he must live within three moral frameworks at once. The first is the one that all men inhabit, based on the assumption that the world is a good place that makes sense, and that human life *must* have some meaning. The second is the one in which the modern physicist lives, in which everything is relative, and the universe is a pointless joke. The third is the military one, where we all are pawns on a board devoted to the game of bigger and better wars.

Although Brown does his work like a good organization man, he is inwardly rebellious. He refuses to worship the new computer-god, whose goal is to destroy our world. He prefers to put his faith in the imminent arrival of the Aliens, a race of godlike extraterrestrial beings who will rescue The Faithful from the grubbiness of Earthly life.

To help us understand his hunger for something to believe in, Brown cites this analogy:

Why was it . . . the Indians ran with such eagerness . . . to welcome the Spanish savages and call them gods? What . . . urgency was in them, seeing the ships, . . . to run knee-deep into the shallows . . . to call those . . . peasants gods and them-

selves slaves? . . . Surely it was that . . . they mistook those men—swine-herds! failed second sons!—for gods and ancestors, for that ideal, idyllic race that fled this earth when Atlantis was destroyed.

It is only after Brown's commanding officer is converted to the Faith and goes off in search of the Aliens that the book gains narrative thrust. Billy follows his chief across the country, from one mystical screwball to the next. All the important types of True Believers, who preach their private gospels in the back pages of third-rate science-fiction magazines and on all-night radio shows, are included. Miller proves that he knows them well by letting them talk and act like everybody else—except when it comes to their obsessions. But well before this Miller has made his moral point, so the novel becomes a sort of Oz book for grown-ups.

Its finale is disappointing. Although one never expected the space people to show up, something a little grander than Miller's *dénouement* was in order. This is always a problem with Oz books. A reader not equipped with properly tinted glasses at times wonders if the journey to the Emerald City was worth the trouble.

Dramatically, *Looking for the General* is flawed, but thematically it is perfect. It is a profound but funny fable about the dilemma of a rationally trained but spiritually sensitive man.

—W. S. TRACY.

Goose-Stepping for Nato: Since *The Revolt of Gunner Ash* and *Officer Factory*, Hans Hellmut Kirst has been the unofficial chronicler of the German army and its absurdities. His world remains the same in *The Night of the Generals* (Harper & Row, \$4.95), but his grip on it is firmer. The forbidding façade of Prussian soldiering has never been hit by such missiles before, and German officers must have a difficult time holding on to their reputation as long as Kirst is allowed to lie in ambush in the bookstalls. The grand tradition of the Wehrmacht dies a mock-heroic death in the pages of this exceedingly funny novel.

Translated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn, *The Night of the Generals* is a fast-moving suspense story that begins in wartime Poland, shifts to German-occupied Paris, and ends in contemporary Berlin. The dead bodies of three prostitutes mark a slimy trail that engages the police of several countries and that leads into the upper echelons of the German army. The villain is General Tanz of the élite Nibelungen division, a monster in shining armor, who conducts himself like a latter-day god of war. Like most of Kirst's officers, Tanz

exudes a masculinity of mythical proportions and hides his morbid soul under a collection of medals. He is by far the most memorable character in Kirst's staff of generals.

On another level this uproarious comedy is also an exposé of the attitudes of the German military caste and its fast adjustment to postwar realities. Hitler's minions now serve Ulbricht or NATO with the same efficiency and devotion with which they fought the wars of the Third Reich. Kirst combines fact and fiction in a spell-binding narrative and often achieves the immediacy of a newspaper story with a Berlin dateline. But *The Night of the Generals* is, first of all, a superbly written thriller.

—JOSEPH P. BAUKE.

The Dot Under a ?: Bobby Hirshman, the hero of S. J. Wilson's *Hurray for Me* (Crown, \$4.50), is a bright five-year-old, but he cannot understand the sudden disruption of his world: Why has his mother temporarily abandoned him? Why must his friend Johnny move into an orphanage? Why do people die? He tells us: "My world was the dot under a question mark." Bobby searches everywhere for answers—in school, synagogue, and even candy store—but the ones he discovers are too "enlightened" to change him. He must find his own truth. Miraculously he does as he watches the funeral of Johnny's mother (and all mothers?): life continues "out of Eden."

Of course, we have met Bobby (and his mother) in many other American-Jewish works—*Call It Sleep*, by Henry Roth, and *Genesis*, by Delmore Schwartz, to name only two. His rite of passage, although occasionally funny and tender, does not surprise us very much. It remains stereotyped.

There is a related problem. Mr. Wilson must make us believe in childhood. This requires great craft. He has to suspend himself; he has to be adult and childish, all-knowing and innocent. But he cannot "let go." He views childhood as he thinks it should be; consequently, he does not capture its terrifying mo-

ments (as does Henry Roth). Usually he is content to give us bouncy dialogue, poetic set-pieces, and Old World charm.

This is not to deny that Mr. Wilson has talent; too often he manipulates Bobby (and us) for the sake of this very talent. When he forgets that he is writing a first novel, he purifies and refashions the clichés. Then Bobby breathes; he is no longer theoretical.

—IRVING MALIN.

A Godly Goal: In a short but absorbing novel Pär Lagerkvist, Nobel Prize-winner and Swedish Academy member, ends the tetralogy that began with *Barabbas* and continued with *The Sibyl* and *The Death of Ahasuerus*. Awash in mysticism and allegory, *Pilgrim at Sea* (Random House, \$3.95) advances the story of Tobias and his search for God to its inevitable conclusion. Although Tobias bravely and confidently sets out for the Holy Land, he does not get there. The pirate ship on which he travels flounders on its uncertain course in the same manner that Tobias, hoping for the unseen goal, ultimately doubts that he will ever reach it.

The novel comprises a story within a story—a not always fortunate format, especially when the secondary narrative occupies as much space as it does in this case. The push of dramatic events, however, makes the device effective and plausible.

Here Giovanni, a crew member who befriends Tobias, tells about his lost love, how his priesthood was shattered, and how he, unfrocked and banished from his home town, joined the pirates on their lawless expeditions. With a hand less firm and artistic than Mr. Lagerkvist's, this episode might have become tasteless or even ludicrous since it involves an elaborate case of mistaken identity. But in his deceptively simple language it becomes a convincing story, with brilliant color and remarkable force.

It has been suggested that *Pilgrim at Sea*, which is translated from the Swedish by Naomi Walford, marks Lagerkvist's farewell to the Christian faith. I cannot feel that, principally because the author, although a confirmed skeptic, is at heart a deeply religious person. Moreover, this tale ends on a note of trust, perhaps an unreasoning trust, but one of confident submission, a mood seldom found in his earlier writings. Tobias himself sums it up in these words:

That perfect love exists and the Holy Land exists; it is just that we cannot reach it. That perhaps we are only on our way there—only pilgrims at sea.

—HOLGER LUNDBERGH.

