

Genesis of a Power Elite

The Death of Artemio Cruz, by Carlos Fuentes, translated from the Spanish by Sam Hileman (Farrar, Straus, 306 pp. \$4.95), personifies in its title character the betrayal of the Mexican in the name of the Revolution. Seymour Menton is editor of *Hispania*. He has published three books on the fiction of Latin America.

By SEYMOUR MENTON

IN *The Death of Artemio Cruz* Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's leading "angry young man," traces in the history of his protagonist the genesis of his country's power elite. The dying man recalls the twelve key periods of his life, symbolized geographically, that mark his rise from obscurity to national prominence. In the 1890s the rejected illegitimate child of a decadent Veracruz plantation family, Cruz becomes the unscrupulous Puebla hacienda owner of the 1920s, and finally the Mexico City tycoon of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties who deals with American businessmen, bribes public officials, and vacations in



—David Drew Zing.
Carlos Fuentes—"muralistic"

Paris and Acapulco. The vehicle for Artemio Cruz's vertiginous ascent is the Revolution, which the thirty-five-year-old Fuentes and his contemporaries no longer feel obliged to revere blindly. The pivotal chapter of the novel depicts the 1915 execution of a Yaqui Indian and Gonzalo Bernal, the honest in-

tellectual who denounces the betrayal of the Revolution's ideals. Their cellmate is the opportunistic Artemio Cruz, who not only survives but subsequently marries Bernal's sister and restores the family fortune by exploiting the peasants more cleverly but every bit as ruthlessly as their pre-revolutionary masters.

The defrauding of the Mexican people in the name of the Revolution is not a new theme for Carlos Fuentes. His first and most successful novel, *Where the Air Is Clear* (1958), presented a Dos Passos-like cross section of the four million inhabitants of Mexico City, whose greater social mobility since the Revolution has not narrowed the gap between the upper and lower classes. In *The Death of Artemio Cruz* Fuentes's technique is still muralistic but it is chronologically vertical rather than horizontal as he concentrates on only one character. Although Cruz obviously represents the ruling oligarchy, his name—meaning "Cross" in English—has religious overtones that may be interpreted in two ways. He is the cross borne by the Mexican people but he is also the tragic figure whose material success is a poor substitute for the true love that he has craved since infancy.

CRUZ becomes increasingly cynical as he realizes the impossibility of finding human warmth and understanding in his wife, daughter, and several mistresses, while the loss of the only three people whom he ever loved teaches him how unjust and irrational life can be. When his childhood mentor is transferred from the plantation, the fourteen-year-old Artemio reacts violently and shoots the wrong man. In 1913, when federal troops kill Regina, his first and only real love, he forgets all fears and rides madly through the enemy camp. Twenty-six years later, when his alter-ego son, Lorenzo, dies heroically in the Spanish Civil War, the last idealistic spark is abruptly extinguished.

Although Artemio Cruz is certainly a more complex protagonist than the villains of the social protest novels of the Thirties, Fuentes does not completely succeed in making him come to life. Cruz is stylistically dissected by the nonconsecutive flashbacks, narrated in the third person, and the prolix expression of his dying thoughts, narrated in the first and second persons.

A strong indictment of the Mexican ruling class, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* is not the consummate novel that Carlos Fuentes still shows promise of creating. Nevertheless, it may well be his best effort to date. Sam Hileman's translation is skilfully done and captures the spirit of the original, no mean task in view of the author's exuberant style and abundant use of Mexican slang.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

MORE CAREER WOMEN REMINISCE

American women who have pursued a variety of callings have frequently set down accounts of their careers. A group of these, assembled by Helene Nitzsche of Maquoketa, Iowa, appeared in SR for February 29th. Here, from the same hand, is another such group. You are asked to assign the right authors to the right autobiographies. Identifications are made on page 50.

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|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Grace Moore | () "Forty Plus and Fancy Free" |
| 2. Irene Castle | () "News is a Singular Thing" |
| 3. Fannie Hurst | () "You're Only Human Once" |
| 4. Mary Pickford | () "The Lady Bullfighter" |
| 5. Hortense Odium | () "The Fabric of Memory" |
| 6. Eleanor Belmont | () "Sunshine and Shadow" |
| 7. Bettina Ballard | () "Many a Good Crusade" |
| 8. Malvina Hoffman | () "Castles in the Air" |
| 9. Emily Kimbrough | () "Story of a Pioneer" |
| 10. Anna Howard Shaw | () "Portrait of Myself" |
| 11. Ivy Baker Priest | () "Heads and Tales" |
| 12. Rosalie S. Morton | () "Green Grows Ivy" |
| 13. Marguerite Higgins | () "A Woman's Place" |
| 14. Patricia McCormick | () "A Woman Surgeon" |
| 15. Margaret Bourke-White | () "In My Fashion" |
| 16. Virginia C. Gildersleeve | () "Anatomy of Me" |

Of Dreams and Reality

***The Mortal Wound*, By Raffaele La Capria, translated from the Italian by Marguerite Waldman (Farrar, Straus. 191 pp. \$4.75), winner of the Strega prize, evokes a dreamlike Naples whose young men long to escape to the "real world." Dorrie Pagones studied comparative literature in Europe under a Fulbright grant.**

By DORRIE PAGONES

IF THE characters in movies like Fellini's 8½ assembled at a literary cocktail party, they would talk about books like Raffaele La Capria's *The Mortal Wound*. This intriguing, murky, elegant little novel, winner of Italy's Strega prize, evokes a Naples as insubstantial and dreamlike as Prospero's island—but a modern island, on which Miranda suns herself in a bikini and Ferdinand rides a Vespa.

The action, which is principally mental, takes place mainly between the morning and late afternoon of one summer day in 1954, the day young Mas-

simo De Luca is to leave Naples and with it all the languidly seductive atmosphere of his salad days, to seek a new, more vigorous life in Rome. The short last part of the novel tells briefly how he returns to Naples, some years later, and learns through various confrontations something of what has happened to the city and to his old comrades in his absence.

Throughout, the dreaming and waking worlds are mingled. The Neapolitan sun beats down and the water glistens. A fish passes slowly through the dark water; seaweed turns to shadows; the glimmering light reveals rocks, which merge into chairs and tables, until the submarine world becomes the bed on which Massimo is beginning to awake.

Massimo's friend Gaetano, who escapes before him into the "real world," imagines Naples to be a virgin forest in which the individual's struggle to assert himself is simply a waste of time—"You can't hold out all alone against a Forest. . . ." "We live in a city that mortally wounds you or lulls you to sleep," thinks Massimo. "At bottom, Gaetano was right. 'What's still holding you back?' He would have laughed if I'd answered him, 'To find again a single one of those days.'"

But if Massimo and Gaetano get away, there are always plenty to replace them. Chief among the stayers are Sasà, a moneyless charmer, and his faithful imitator, Massimo's younger brother, Nini. To such as these, only one thing matters: to be an exception. Nini meditates:

Massimo, for example, has read an endless number of books, and as for Gaetano, ugh . . . And yet Massimo is not an exception. Because to be an exception neither looks, education, elegance nor even money are, as it happens, of any use.

As the story of a city and of a young man's coming of age, *The Mortal Wound* is, for all its slight appearance, a distinctly provocative book.

Avocado with Venom: Elaine Dundy's first novel, *The Dud Avocado*, is the pointless, improbable story of Sally Jay Gorce, an innocently amoral young American girl on the loose among the Bohemians of the Left Bank. It is intensely feminine, harmlessly sexy,

and mildly amusing. It sold 16,000 copies.

So now, in *The Old Man and Me* (Dutton, \$4.50), Miss Dundy has given her large and eager public an identical heroine in a yarn about the Bohemians of Soho. One of the great things about being a critic is observing an artist's development.

A few improvements have been made since the last edition . . . um, I mean book. The characterization is a bit more substantial; a little less dramatic strain is placed on the "oh-look-at-this-exotic-setting" gambit, and there is a plot, no matter how silly, in place of the jolly game of musical beds, which was the narrative center of *Avocado*.

Betsy Lou Saegessor has come to Merrie England to get an inheritance, which she feels to be rightfully hers, from a middle-aged reprobate named C. D. McKee. If I followed the relationship correctly, he is the second husband of Betsy Lou's late father's deceased second wife. Okay, got that? Betsy Lou's main tactic is to have an affair with her "step-step-father"; but she also makes a few off-hand attempts to murder him—which render her repeated declarations of love somewhat less than entirely convincing. She gets her money eventually, but by that time the reader is apt to have lost any interest in her fate.

Miss Dundy's minor figures are all standard types so, while she has a sharp but superficial wit, many situations that might have been genuinely funny if the personalities involved had come to life seem merely clever in such



—Jerry Bauer

Raffaele La Capria—"provocative."

FRAZER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1085

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1085 will be found in the next issue.

PLAB HCFTKDQ KAORFKQX, MRZ

ACAQ QDQF HCFTLDQ

WCAZQPNZ.

LACABPCRX

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1084
The greatest of faults, I should say,
is to be conscious of none.

—CARLYLE.