

# Amazon in Search of Money and Men

***Courage, the Adventuress, and The False Messiah***, by Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, translated by Hans Speier (Princeton University Press. 292 pp. \$6), contains a sampler of works by the chronicler of the seventeenth-century underworld who inspired Bertolt Brecht. Richard Plant teaches Germanic literature at CCNY.

By RICHARD PLANT

THE PATTERN of the picaresque novel came to Germany via Spain, France, and England. Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen brought the genre to its most beautiful, or, one should rather say, devastating flowering in his famous *Adventurous Simplicissimus* (1669). Grimmelshausen, who published under seven pseudonyms and wrote laudatory comments on his own aliases, has never had a public in America—perhaps because he is both too complex and too scatological, or perhaps simply because he is not easy to translate. Now Hans Speier, a specialist on baroque literature, has put together a sampler of Grimmelshausen's works and added an excellent introduction, and one can only regret that he hasn't given us a larger slice of both.

The main part, taken from *Courage, the Adventuress*, written in 1670, chronicles episodes from the life of a handsome, shrewd, aggressive woman who is plagued by a huge appetite for money and men. Though she exploits and fools many most of the time, she loses out in the end against those invincible enemies, time and war. Fighting ferociously to the finish, she skips through the disorder of a world hopelessly out of focus and peopled by knaves, fools, robbers, highwaymen, gamblers, cheats, satyrs, and killers. Courage is no better—as a matter of fact, she is an insatiable brawler and thief, even taking clothes and goods from corpses on the battlefields. She reincarnates that ancient archetype the fighting Amazon, the virago who amazes the professionals by being braver than most men. But she is also given to love-making on such a gigantic scale that she neglects her traveling secondhand shop. Her name, by the way, has nothing to do with any lack of fear—in a particularly risqué scene, Grimmelshausen re-

ports how she acquired her nickname and lost one of her most valued possessions at a remarkably early age.

As we follow incident after incident, as Courage acquires lovers and goods only to lose them just as fast, we realize that Grimmelshausen has composed a scathing satire on seventeenth-century existence, and that it is as one-sided as all satires. He knows only "low life." These mercenaries, whores, rapists, and scavengers never exhibit more than one or two traits; hardly anyone ever rises above thirst for money and sex. Through this accumulation of elementary appetites and actions, the universe appears lawless, filthy, and drained of meaning. Grimmelshausen never mentions a cloud, a tree, or the weather; he introduces no houses, no churches, no lakes. The monsters of Hieronymus Bosch at least are set before some recognizable if enigmatic landscape; but Courage moves through a strangely abstract world.

She possesses one quality lacking in the orthodox *picaresque*: she undergoes a transformation. At the end of her life, she shows regrets and a trace of melancholy. Nevertheless, the canvas unfolded by Grimmelshausen is reminiscent of one of those crowded battle paintings depicting scenes of violence against a backdrop without perspective. And, odd as it sounds, this makes the story more acceptable to us. Courage is forever indulging in acts of revenge. These, it is true, are only executed after she has been hurt, but they do not induce empathy in today's reader. Furthermore, our set of taboos has changed: while we have become used to normal, deviant, or

violent sex, to episodes in which erotic activities are recorded with medical minuteness, the area of scatology still carries for many the big sign "Out of Bounds," and here *Courage, the Adventuress* is so adventurous she might have stunned top sergeants from a James Jones novel. Chapter 17 would probably shock Jean Genet and Henry Miller; but even the older Courage would have been flabbergasted by the glorification of pimps and hermaphroditical murderers practiced by Genet.

Part II, *The False Messiah*, a selection from *The Enchanted Bird's-Nest*, paints an equally grotesque picture of the world. The shock this time originates in the theme itself: how an unscrupulous thief, endowed with the gift of invisibility and devoured by a passion for the daughter of the richest Portuguese Jewish merchant in Amsterdam, plays on the superstitions of the community to present himself as the Prophet Elijah; how he seduces the girl, loots her father, and then converts the girl to Christianity. The chronicle is rich in folklore, eschatology, and witchcraft, and it would be highly offensive to true believers of all denominations if it were to be taken seriously. But these episodes are really *aventures*; the implausibilities are those of a Satanic Disneyland. The tone of pious remorse that is sounded occasionally at the edges of the story seems patently false—it is hard to comprehend how the Victorians could have made a religious author out of Grimmelshausen.

Why this ragged cosmos, and particularly the figure of Courage, appealed to Bertolt Brecht is clear; it is less clear why he changed her so radically that she turned into a character defying precisely the theories Brecht was attempting to demonstrate by her fate. But this is another problem and should not affect the enjoyment of those readers who want to discover for themselves the underworld of the baroque.



"Well, I'd rather have him play the flute than the lyre. When he's playing the flute he can't sing."

# A Dangerous Spark of Life

***The Burnt Ones*, by Patrick White** Viking. 308 pp. \$4.95, contains eleven stories about men and women who have been scorched by their lives. Robert L. Stilwell teaches English and comparative literature at Ohio State University.

By ROBERT L. STILWELL

IT MAY seem perverse to suggest that the Australian Patrick White is among the more difficult practitioners of fiction now living and working. At first glance—and often at twentieth glance—his pages are likely to look shallow, ungainly, homemade, even simple-minded. You might suspect that, far from being masterful exploitations of language and experience, they were scribbled on rough-grained boards by a novice writer wielding a carpenter's pencil. Yet much of White's difficulty arises precisely from this unpromising "surface." For before you can decide whether really profound matters are going forward within his work, you need a constantly reasserted act of faith to believe that such writing could be worth bothering with at all.

Once you achieve this act of faith, what then? Does Patrick White deserve, and repay, a reading in depth? I think he may, at least partially. There can be little doubt that far too many critics and reviewers have overpraised his gifts, his accomplishments. At the same time, however, there can be little doubt that his voice is incomparably the most commanding yet raised within the dialogue of Australian literature. Until recently a sort of prophet without honor in his own country, he has devoted himself, across the past fifteen years or so, to shaping a distinctive tone, an inner vision, a rugged moral fervor. His novels *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) were ponderous, earnest creations, preoccupied with the largest issues of good and evil and with the sheer burden of existence. And for those who itch to rank writers there is perhaps nothing wrong with placing White beside the good lesser-lights—the Alan Patons and Brian Moores, for instance—of our day.

The present volume rakes together eleven stories, two of which grope toward novella length, completed since 1961; and many admirers of White's big novels will probably obtain from it their

initial acquaintance with what he can do in shorter forms. (Although most of the pieces in *The Burnt Ones*—not "some of them," as the dustjacket equivocates—have been given to Australian and English magazines, none has hitherto seen publication in the United States). The book's title represents a literal translation of the phrase *hoi kaumenoi*, which the Greeks euphemized to "the poor unfortunates" but which originally meant something like "those who are burned." It makes an apt title, too; for the people in each of White's stories, as in his novels, are men and women who somehow have gotten scorched or charred by their lives, like brambles left in a blackened field.

Several of the stories are set against the backdrop of White's native Australia; others take place in Athens and the Near East, both of which he came to know as an RAF intelligence officer during World War II. What concerns him most, however, is not so much landscape as the soulscape of his characters; and at his best he can illuminate that soulscape in a particularly merciless way. To read the slighter pieces here—such as "The Evening at Sissy Kamara's," "The Letters," or the contrived "Willy-wagtails by Moonlight"—is rather like sipping tepid water from a broken pop bottle. The stronger stories, though, generate a kind of cumulative and hard-to-deny power. "A Cheery Soul" grotesquely inverts Flaubert's "A Simple Heart." "Clay" presses the terrifying whole of a psychotic lifetime into twenty pages, and "Dead Roses" provides a slow, careful study of a woman's withdrawal from reality. "A Glass of Tea" explores sexuality and disaster, as do "Miss Slattery and Her Demon Lover" and "Being Kind to Titina" (both replete with footnotes). And I thought "Down at the Dump" a competent seriocomic story, despite the triteness of its title and despite a sugared, ain't-everybody-wonderful ending that might cause even William Saroyan to blush.

LET me mention one aspect of White's style that distracted my respect for *The Tree of Man*, *Voss*, and *Riders in the Chariot* and that I found nearly intolerable throughout the present gathering of stories. It would seem immutable fact that the sovereign writers, to paraphrase Goethe, are those with whom no grammar text can possibly keep pace. Nevertheless, I don't for the life of me under-

stand White's compulsion to litter his exposition with ugly fragments of sentences. Lumpy bits of sentences. Just chunks. Exactly similar to these. Hundreds of them. If this pidgin syntax possessed some rationale of art and truth, if it helped to hone the sledgehammer gracelessness of its author's prose, it could of course be perfectly justified. As things stand, however, I can't agree that it does. Instead, it rather reminds me of a Remedial Composition theme.

**In the Shadow of a Madhouse:** An insane asylum rears up ominously in the background of Marie Bardos's *Night Light* (Doubleday, \$4.95), a novel out of the Deep South. Miss Clossie, Earl, Frank, Sheriff Sigur, the boy Alo, Miss Adele are so fitful, strained, and troubled they might have just stepped out from behind its barred windows, or they might belong in it right now. Instead, they wander freely but compulsively through these pages, and despite themselves connive to bring their story to a powerful climax—never far from that asylum.

At the start Miss Clossie sprawls on a bench, her dress hiked up and her painted toenails digging slyly into timid, lecherous Alo; Earl with his dreadfully strong hands calls on Miss Adele; Frank plots with the sheriff; gas pumps sickeningly into the lone woman's kitchen, and all the strings fall unwanted into the hands of Alo, who alone knows the nub of the mystery, and knows too that knowledge is evil and can cost him his life.

This is a sinister land; even the willows droop not poetically but threateningly, and the great swamp looks deadly black. Miss Adele, who is rich, wants to divorce Frank, who needs her money. Her cousin Oswald, her lawyer, can't catch her sober long enough to discuss her case, though she is sober enough to realize that not her hand but some enemy's turned on the gas that nearly killed her. She sets herself up in a sort of fort or redoubt, hemmed in by charged screens intended to be the death of the intruder she fears but cannot name.

Danger is coiled under foot and lies in wait at the opening of every fresh, challenging chapter—one even feels that the author, who wrote this first novel on the first Doubleday-Columbia University literary fellowship, herself must shiver apprehensively at the suspense she builds up.

The mystery will keep you reading, and the writing will keep you from forgetting the excellencies of this novel: the implacably outlined characters, the timing adjusted with the utmost nicety, the flashes of intuition and imagination, and the unremittingly portentous mood.

—W. G. ROGERS.