

The Back of God's Hand

***Let Me Count the Ways*, by Peter De Vries (Little, Brown. 307 pp. \$5), is a comic novel that explores the religious and other foibles of a Polish-American furniture mover and his academic son. Rod Jellema, who teaches English at the University of Maryland, is general editor of the Eerdmans series of booklets, Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective, which will include his study of Peter De Vries.**

By ROD JELLEMA

IT HAS become fashionable to assert that Peter De Vries, surely the funniest novelist now writing, is a disturbed and serious artist who should be given considered attention. Carefully hinting that he alone sees the agony beneath the humor, the person who says this scolds the rest of us for lack of perceptiveness. Yet the fact is more and more readers are becoming aware of his seriousness.

This, however, does not in any way suggest a decline in De Vries's sense of the ludicrous. *Let Me Count the Ways* is as brilliantly funny as its predecessors. Its protagonist, Stan Waltz, is a Polish-American vernacular character with freethinking, intellectual pretensions. "I don't mean I'm a brain," Stan explains his atheistic barbs, "but I do try to use what gray matter God gave me. Oops, there isn't any." His wife's getting saved -- "plain lowdown, cornball, meat-and-potatoes Jesus Saves saved" -- puts her, Stan sighs, "beyond redemption." As she gives him tracts on the street, fundamentalist non sequiturs at the table, and a "Bible belt" for his birthday, Stan rummages through his bizarre world looking for peace and sense. He is a hefty piano mover whose quest of a sympathetic mistress (the intellectual type, "not being able to communicate and so on . . . a copy of *Redbook* or *Cosmopolitan* always under her arm") fizzles when he suffers a hernia trying to lug her to the bedroom. He is the mocking nonbeliever who trembles and prays and baptizes himself under the kitchen tap only to find that what he took to be Christ's Second Coming was a conflagration at the fireworks factory. He is the free-love advocate who develops the habit of watching tenderly through the bedroom window as his wife undresses, only to be

picked up by the police and quoted in the town paper as a unique kind of Peeping Tom.

Although Part Two is narrated by and focused on Stan's clever son, a college English teacher, the farce and slapstick roll crazily on. With two backgrounds to rebel against, Tom Waltz has emotional binges in which he shouts during mission revival meetings, then sings blasphemous parodies of old hymns with truck drivers in a bar. On leave of absence to get hold of himself, he undergoes what must be the strangest conversion in literature: it is brought about by a miraculous sickness at Lourdes.

But there is a great deal more here than the farcical and slapstick. And what more there is is wedded to the comedy in a kind of mystical union. This ability to catch the coalescence of the absurd and the grim, the foolish and the compassionate, in a tragifarce concoction, is De Vries's singular achievement. Call it, if you wish, complexity -- a rich sense of man's helplessness, his capacity for self-deception, his loneliness in an essentially rotten world, his need for understanding and love. In each of De Vries's novels the characters try to escape into the suave world of urbane self-confidence -- only to stumble into absurdities but partly of their own making; they come out of it exhausted and mellowed and mildly pathetic. This theme of escape and pity does not run alongside the comedy; it is the comedy.



Peter De Vries -- "a startled vision of man."

It starts with De Vries's awareness of human inadequacy, of Original Sin.

In its tender embodiment of a startled vision of man, *Let Me Count the Ways* is strong enough to override and absorb the tricks with which De Vries is sometimes too versatile. Agony was predominant in *Blood of the Lamb*, zaniness in *Tunnel of Love*. Achieving in his latest novel a harmony of the two, De Vries penetrates with greater clarity the odd dimensions of the modern spiritual predicament.



Exorcising D-Day: The Goncourt jury awarded its prize in 1963 to Armand Lanoux's *The Broken Shore*, translated by Alan Daventry (Dutton, \$4.50), a story of World War II revisited. Sixteen years after D-Day a French-Canadian ex-GI and the fiancée of his buddy who was killed in action make a pilgrimage to the beaches of Normandy, looking for Jacques's grave.

The novel purports to narrate the exorcism of a spell cast over the two by Jacques's death, which has blighted their lives since the war. One suspects, however, they will be the poorer for it. Valerie is a spinster schoolteacher. Liberated, she can know that her Jacques was no angel and that she has been using his memory to ward off men in general. She can now marry Abel and have children. Lots of luck! Abel is a bald and heavy-set radio announcer, whose definition of life has been "clowning and putrescence!" His liberation is the discovery (qualified by the author as possibly an illusion) that although forgetfulness is life and kids go on playing no matter which side wins the war, the kids in France are now "free from fear."

The thought in this novel is muddled and the ending seems a pious bit tacked on; yet the book does not let us down entirely. Lanoux's narrative skill is well displayed by the alternating accounts of Abel's experiences during the invasion and those of his present holiday. Memories of muck, the bombs, and the girls float through his mind: Jennifer the Southampton barmaid, Lucette found in a cellar, the Resistance fighters from the booby hatch, the German prisoners Abel could not shake off, soldiers floundering in swamps, the dead and the agonized, are woven through the account of Abel's vacation adventures.

Possibly it is because Abel comes so vividly to life in his pranks and pleasures that the "message" of the book seems tacked on. There is enough without it -- for ex-GIs who can imagine themselves going back, for others who can live vicariously, even for those who relish disquisitions on subjects like war brass, the American matriarchy, or the American bosom fixation.

—LAURENT LESAGE.

A Sense of Loss

A Penny for Charity, by Seymour Epstein (Little, Brown. 242 pp. \$4.95), presents a gallery of unexceptional people coping with lives that have not fulfilled their youthful expectations. Ruth Brown is a member of SR's editorial staff.

By RUTH BROWN

LIKE the author's widely praised novel *Leah*, the sixteen stories in this collection are concerned for the most part with unremarkable people in commonplace circumstances. Seymour Epstein's characters are neither rebellious nor especially neurotic, and their collisions with life lead not to catastrophe but to an experience of the "tears in things."

A recurring theme is the bewilderment and sense of loss that follow when early visions are abandoned for the compromises the world demands of most of us. The young husband in "Playgrounds, Parties, and the Primordial Molecule" is distressed because his friends' cocktail conversation has dete-

riorated from "Proust and politics" to business, babies, and dirty jokes. In "The Ride Back from Lenox" the young father confesses that he resents his children with their "greedy, mindless, draining encroachments"; he recalls a drunken automobile ride with his wife, when "at least you were a creature alive on earth and not a flat dumb surface pasted with timetables, wet diapers and bills!" His wife's reply, "We're ordinary people. Neither of us will ever be very important," makes him realize that she has "gone on alone in the busy resignation of things as they must be."

A third young husband, in "Wheat Closed Higher and Cotton Was Mixed," is married to an untalented would-be actress. Having "pinched off the nerve of illusion," he gives up his own promising career as a director to enable her to pursue her futile ambition. He also submits to her emotional blackmail (as Leah did to her father's), cultivating the gentle mendacity that will protect her from self-awareness.

But the sense of loss is not limited to the still young. Middle-aged Mr. Kaplan in "The Wreckers," an electrical

supplies dealer who is selling his failing business, watches while a building across the street, one of his life's backdrops, is being demolished, copes with telephone calls from an insufferable daughter (married to a successful businessman), and thinks wistfully of Mr. Nicoletti, the tailor downstairs, who makes little money but has the satisfaction of creating something with his own hands.

The title story, "A Penny for Charity," concerns a grocer, Max Keller, who, otherwise fairly content with his life, wears his ugly body like a borrowed garment. On what may be his deathbed his fevered dreams persuade him that he has "picked up the wrong baggage somehow," and that if he presents his check at the proper window he will receive his rightful form. Thus the ancient idea of conflict between flesh and spirit, fleetingly visible in much of Epstein's other work, is here made manifest.

In several stories Epstein enters into the minds of the very old. The ancient Mr. Isaacs, a Polish immigrant, sits all day in the sun while fragments of the faraway past stray across his fading mind like vivid but disjointed snippets from an old film. Epstein is less successful when he tries to see through the eyes of the very young: his children remain at one remove.

In such a varied collection it is not surprising that one or two stories should not quite come off. Epstein's gift for creating unique if unexceptional personalities deserts him in "Happy Birthday," which reads as though he were working some private irritation out of his system. There is an unmistakable and uncharacteristic note of spite in the portrait of the tiresome Paula and her strenuous worship of "good taste." She is evoked less through her own words or actions than through her husband's resentment as he shops for the birthday present that has turned into an annual test of his own esthetic development.

But for most of its length the book—devoid as it is of either sentimentality or cynicism (which are, after all, the same thing)—displays both intuition and compassion. Epstein's people live lives that lack spectacular excitement or profound tragedy, but for all their failings and foolishness they have courage and even a touch of dignity.



Terror on the Mediterranean: Prescription for a fine summer afternoon: one hammock, one iced drink, and a copy of *In the Sun*, by Jon Godden (Knopf, \$4.95). If there's a cool breeze blowing, so much the better, but it isn't really necessary. The shivers of apprehension that ripple across Miss Godden's
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"You are as blind as a bat, sir."