

himself all the more. If he grasps it, he may at last come to see that he's not really as fragile as his patriarchal concepts have made him out to be.



**Shock of the Primal Scene:** Reviewing *Hope for Man*, by Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman (Simon & Schuster, \$4.95), has posed some problems, not the least formidable being the necessity of reading it. Were it not for the fact that its predecessor, *Peace of Mind*, was a prodigious best-seller and that, like it, *Hope for Man* bears the colophon of a highly respected publishing house, the whole matter might best be passed over in silence. It would, I believe, be faintly comical to take this posthumously published book seriously for what it pretends to be, and is not—a learned venture into philosophy, including a critical appraisal of what is held to be the devilishly subversive influence of certain existentialist writers and (at no extra cost) a prescription for salvation.

A good deal of the diagnosis and treatment of this ailment, here called pessimism, is in the name of modern psychiatry, if not exactly in its terms. The rhetoric is frequently crude, its devices more those of the debater (I almost said demagogue) than of the scholar: build them up before knocking them down and/or question their motives. For example, Kierkegaard ("the essential motif in his whole thought . . . his contempt for human relatedness") is the target of some quite extravagant praise, both before and after his condemnation as "the greatest source of pessimism in our age." The bill of particulars against him includes, *inter alia*, the idea that he was authoritarian (which, as everyone knows, is dreadful) and further that there is "no doubt that he was exceedingly vain and arrogant in daring to pit his intellectual conclusions against all the doctrines and dogmas of his day" (which is, I suppose, even worse). Sartre is "perhaps the greatest spokesman for darkness" and "all who follow in his footsteps are tarred with the black brush of negation."

In his efforts to exorcise these devils, the late Dr. Liebman looks to psychoanalysis and as his major weapon points to the shock of the primal scene. At any rate, the philosophies of Berkeley, Hume, and "in some respects, Kant" (though not exactly existentialists, they too, in their own ways, promoted evil) are so explained. The work of Bertrand Russell (I'm sorry to say that I have forgotten his qualifications for inclusion here) is no longer a mystery if one knows that Russell was an orphan. I can't wait to get back to the *Principia Mathematica*, but suppose that I'll have to wait until I know something of Whitehead's infancy.

—LESLIE SCHAEFFER.

## In Groups Within Groups

*The Last Jew in America*, by Leslie A. Fiedler (Stein & Day, 191 pp. \$4.95), is a trio of wild tales dealing with ethnic isolates in our modern wasteland. Samuel I. Bellman is the editor of "Survey and Forecast."

By SAMUEL I. BELLMAN

MUCH of the action of Leslie Fiedler's new fiction collection takes place in "Lewis and Clark City," which is supposed to be across the border from Montana but seems more like a thinly disguised Missoula, Montana, which Fiedler has now left for good. The three ethnic isolates Fiedler depicts are "The Last Jew in America," "The Last WASP in the World," and "The First Spade in the West." Surrounded by goggle-eyed in-groups, the alien Jew, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and Negro are riven by misery, confusion, and a desperate urge to do something to end their uniqueness. But, in Fiedler's book, there's really not much they can do, and this is the peg on which he hangs his three tales.

Two statements by Fiedler throw a great deal of light on *The Last Jew in America*, the last two novellas of which are possibly the worst fictions he has ever made up. In his famous essay, "No! in Thunder" (the introduction to his 1960 essay collection of that name) he pointed out, "In the realm of fiction, to be inept, whether unwittingly or on purpose, is the single unforgivable sin. To be inept is to lie; and for this, time and the critics grant no pardon."

Two-thirds of his current work represent a fantastic degree of ineptness and literary falsity. His stereotypes of white gentile, Indian, and Negro, for example, are utterly unreal and hence meaningless. The hysteria and frenzy that in true Fiedler-fashion underlie these stories indicate clearly not that his message is urgent or that the time is sadly out of joint, but simply that he is one of the outstanding Spasmodic prose-poets of our time. As with the Victorian Spasmodic poets or the nineteenth-century American Spasmodic fictionist John Neal, Fiedler's imaginative writing represents a series of emotional fits. And as with early American film comedies, *The Last Jew in America* and much of Fiedler's other fiction also depend heavily on the wild melee, the uninhibited free-for-all that releases a lot of pent-up tension but otherwise doesn't make much sense.



—Jim Tuttle.

**Leslie Fiedler—"Spasmodic prose-poet."**

This is not to say that Fiedler does not have a serious aim in writing fiction. Which leads us to his second statement, taken from his 1951 introduction to Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*. To what does Weil bear witness, Fiedler asked himself? "To the uses of exile and suffering, to the glory of annihilation and absurdity, to the unforeseen miracle of love." These uses, this glory, and this miracle Fiedler has been attempting to convey in his stories and novels.

*The Last Jew in America* is full of suffering exiles: elderly, anachronistic Jews trying vainly to retain a vestige of Judaism while the town's ex-Jews look on bewilderedly; an anti-Semitic Pulitzer poet suffocated by the only people he can relate to: Jews, particularly Jewish women, who have always thrown themselves at his feet; a Negro night-club operator in Lewis and Clark City, descendant of the slave who accompanied Lewis and Clark, ironically reduced to being the town's showcase Negro and part-time scapegoat.

The fate of these exiles? Annihilation and absurdity, as indicated above, annihilation and absurdity in a kind of oblique glory. Louie Himmelfarb is dying of cancer in a Catholic hospital; his aged friend Jacob Moskowitz, a sort of Jewish town-clown, has trouble rounding up ten even-nominal Jewish males for Yom Kippur rites at Louie's bedside. Poet Vincent Hazelbaker, childless like Louie and Jacob, attends an indescribably vulgar Jewish wedding in New Jersey, fails miserably in his rela-

tionships with his (Jewish) women: wife, mistresses, goddaughter, and in desperation relives a painful experience he had when he returned to Lewis and Clark City and was overwhelmed by the Jews in the local college and the local night spot. Negro Ned York, repudiated openly by his white wife and their daughter, and caught between (1) a possible murder charge involving a white woman and (2) an upcoming Kivvanis Man of the Year award, is the solitary victim of society's ironies whichever way his cards decide to come up.

And what of the unforeseen miracle of love? Too little, too late, too irrelevant to redeem anything or anybody. Jacob Moskowitz kids himself that he will go around Lewis and Clark City entertaining the children of his ex-Jewish colleagues, even show "the descendants of vanished, incredible Jews a Jew in real life, a terrible fact." Vincent Hazelbaker, after any number of madcap brawls and joinings with his own and other men's women, is unable to respond to a letter from a female admirer, begging him to take her. "You don't understand at all," he answers her, in his own mind, and then screams and screams for help. Ned York, on the other hand, is almost destroyed when one woman's unexpected, unwanted gift of love ends in her death.

The one thing needful for Fiedler: less matter and more art. Mere stereotypes and anti-stereotypes don't make good stories. The "class war" approach, so basic in Fiedler's narrow outlook (capitalism vs. socialism, artist vs. society, male vs. female, Jew vs. gentile, white vs. Negro, West vs. East), is another fond fixation of adolescence that should long ago have been given the "No! in Thunder" treatment.

Parkinson has taught us that institutionalization may not always be a good thing. It breeds waste, loss of original purpose, a weakening of ties. The current institutionalization of "Jewish American fiction" has really harmed the psychological perspective and the artistic vision of countless modern writers besides Fiedler. Sol Liptzin's survey, *The Jew in American Literature* (Bloch, \$5.50), which superficially examines the position of the Jew on the American literary scene since Colonial times, is a case in point. The Jewishness or lack of Jewishness of the writers and their characters seems to be what counts, far more than the importance of the story or its artistic effectiveness. Liptzin's book reads like an incomplete Roll of Honor or Dishonor (who has helped, or hindered, The Cause?).

What Liptzin and Fiedler must realize is that only a "Jewish" (or any other in-group) story that transcends stereotypes and class conflicts, and permits honest identification by any intelligent reader is worth mentioning in a literary discus-

sion, worthy of the efforts of a serious writer. In the realm of "Jewish fiction" very fine work has recently been done, such as Leo Litwak's army story, "The Solitary Life of Man"; Silvia Teinbaum's tale of an inept rabbi, "The Sound of Crickets"; S. J. Wilson's novel of two Jewish mothers, *Hurray for Me*; Bruce Jay Friedman's wacky story of

Jewish ritual observance, "When You're Excused You're Excused." These writers reveal similarity in diversity, as well as the truths of the human heart. Without this, there can be no meaningful story of the "Last (or First) so-and-so in America," no comprehension of what the Jew (for example) in American literature signifies.

**The Author:** At Leslie A. Fiedler's home in Buffalo, visitors have a sense of perpetual activity. Telephones ring. Cats get their heads caught in cat food cans. There are always children with house guests on hand. But the family—including the head of the household—seems to thrive on variety, surprise, and excitement. For an acerbic critic, who likes to think of himself, not as a genteel writer, but as one "with a good, healthy pound of vulgarity," Mr. Fiedler, the father of six, is an extremely affable, unruffled man. He is rosy-cheeked, with a curly beard and a disarming grin.

In corduroy trousers, a checked sports shirt, and a sea-green sweater, Mr. Fiedler sat in his kitchen recently and talked about his new book, *The Last Jew in America*, while his cocker spaniel was fed anti-flu pills and a pajama-clad daughter and her girl friend buttered English muffins and drank orange juice.

For more than twenty years, Mr. Fiedler taught English at the University of Montana, and when he left for his present post teaching English at the State University of New York in Buffalo, he found that there were feelings and impressions about the West that he wanted to put down. Then he was asked to deliver a lecture on the literary uses of Lewis and Clark. It was this that was the new book's direct inspiration.

"I began talking about York, Clark's Negro slave, whom the Indians just didn't believe. He was quite a fellow. He would dance a jig and do contortions and left a great trail of bastards behind him. I've made the hero of one of the stories in the book a Negro bartender and ex-prize fighter who thinks he's descended from York."

The title story, Mr. Fiedler says, is based largely on the character of someone he has known. The third story tells of a poet returning to a Western city after being away twenty years.

The blond cocker interrupted the discourse, hiding under the table from Mrs. Fiedler, who was in pursuit with a pill bottle. The crisis over, Mr. Fiedler commented that he has recently revised one of his early works of criticism, *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

"This is a very bad time for criticism, actually," he said. "The old critics have run out of gas and lost touch with what is going on. About 1955, 'modernism'

came to an end. There was no more Eliot, Pound, and Joyce to speak of, and our critics are still oriented to that. The young writers and poets and novelists today don't seem to be especially interested in criticism, and no spokesman from among them has come out.

"In any case, to be criticized easily, literature should be reflective and introspective and highly self-conscious. Impulse and irrationality don't lend themselves to critical writing, so the people who are able to speak to and for today's writers are not the literary critics, but men like Norman O. Brown and Marshall McLuhan who come to literature through sociology and economics."

**MR. FIEDLER** paused for coffee. Then he commented that he likes to think of himself as one of the writers of the older generation (he is forty-nine) who is still interested in what is being written today. "I'm really excited by some of it—particularly what some call the pop novel, others the 'black comic novel.' It's the kind of novel that's rather like vaudeville, being written by people like Donleavy and Jack Barth. Much of it gets its mythology not out of Christian and Greek mythology, but out of yesterday's pop culture—comic books, advertising, rock 'n' roll music. There's the assumption that this is the common culture between the reader and the writer."

Mr. Fiedler calls this the mythology of urban culture and finds it relevant because so few people in the United States grow up anywhere but in the city.

"Not only Ovid seems far away to today's youngsters, but Huck Finn and Rip Van Winkle belong to small-town life, too. It's comic book heroes that are the mythological figures of the metropolis."

Mr. Fiedler's coffee mug was empty. The cat needed assistance in escaping from her dinner can. Mrs. Fiedler was calling her husband to the telephone.

"What do I do when I'm not writing or lecturing? Oh, I play solitaire. Or there are times like the night a while ago when Allen Ginsberg was in town, so we had a giant party for the pedants and the Bohos. At the end of the evening, my son Mike and Ginsberg were singing Tibetan chants together." Mr. Fiedler's blue eyes sparkled as he led me to the door.

—PHYLLIS MERAS.