

# Sweet Sixteen Turned Sour

***The Dissent of Dominick Shapiro***, by Bernard Kops (Coward-McCann, 208 pp. \$4.50), concerns a London drop-out whose rebellion takes the form of a refusal to do or accept anything. Samuel I. Bellman, professor of language arts at California State Polytechnic College, writes frequently on contemporary literature.

By SAMUEL I. BELLMAN

IN MARK HARRIS's amusing play about family in-fighting, *Friedman and Son* (1963), the embattled father wryly remarks: "In some families, needless to say, a certain coolness develops between father and son. Don't ask me to explain it." Bernard Kops's new novel, *The Dissent of Dominick Shapiro*, is another of the countless recent attempts to explain this coolness, place it within a present-day Jewish setting, and hint at a possible tentative solution. So many socioliterary variations have already been played on this theme by Kops's predecessors that there seems little to add to the familiar tragicomedy. But he manages somehow, by blurring sharp distinctions and emphasizing ambiguities of character, to force the reader to a new level of puzzled awareness of the implications of family strife.

The setting is Golders Green, a status-conscious Jewish area on the outskirts of London. At odds with everything and everybody in it is sixteen-year-old Dominick Shapiro, who never lets the reader forget his basic creed, "I dissent." When James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus announced his particular doctrine of denial, "Non serviam," there was philosophy, theology, sensitivity, a whole world of cultural values behind him. Kops's youthful rebel is more like Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*: he simply does not choose to do anything or accept anything, and so he goes outside organized society. It is to the author's credit that he can make us understand Dominick's rejection of his world, while we are not given any reasonable or logical basis—involving adult standards—for that rejection.

Dominick's father, Lew Shapiro, is a middle-aged dress manufacturer always concerned with the next seasonal line. To Dominick he is "pathologically and sexually obsessed with making dresses and money." Although Lew is quite

well-to-do, he is warped by a psychology of fear, want, and uncertainty. Customary health is no sign that death can't strike all at once. Business success may simply foreshadow imminent collapse. A nice family counts for nothing unless all the members reflect clear and unmistakable credit on him. When a son like Dominick comes along and drops out of school to bum his way around London, Lew is hard hit, and shows it. Which is just what Dominick needs for inducement.

Lew's wife, Paula, is bright, kind-hearted, dedicated to stuffing her children with food, and an all-round wonderful wife and mother. One of the major ironies in the novel is that Dominick begins by not really disliking his parents. He is "even honest enough to admit that he might even love them." Why, he can't say; and though he has fought this love, there it remains. So Dominick, held in bondage to his parents, "hates them because he loves them." They give him problems by not being easily hatable. Dom's older brother Alex and married sister Sharon (and her husband and daughter) give him no such problems. Self-righteous and phoney, the three older relatives invite his open hostility; he detests his spoiled niece and deliberately frightens her.

What really severs Dom from his parents and almost everyone else in his family is a nightmarishly tasteless wed-

ding celebration. Unable to stand any more of the cloying food-and-sentiment that have reduced the Shapiro clan to the level of mindless hypocrites, Dom suddenly loses his cool. He leaps up on a table and blurts out a horrible family secret, which happens to be painfully well known to many present. There is a mob scene, he is roughly handled by his father and brother, and the dissent of Dominick Shapiro becomes implemented as he takes to the open road. No Holden Caulfield (despite the blurb on the book jacket), not even an honest picaresque hero, Dom is just a mixed-up kid who learns a very little about life on his brief travels, becomes seriously despondent, and has two humiliating brushes with the law. Then, in an ironic twist, he does an about-face and becomes his father's son with a vengeance.

THE merit of this low-keyed but highly readable book is that it deals sensitively and in an up-to-date manner with one of the profoundest problems to be found in the Hebrew Bible, the stubborn and rebellious son (see Deuteronomy 21: 18-21). Far from causing his Dominick to be given the ultimate punishment by the city elders, Lew, for all his infantile self-pity, suffers for the boy and does the best he can, knowing somehow that it won't do much good.

Every subtly worked out dramatic conflict between father and son is moving—Oedipus, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Mannix's *An End to Fury*, etc.—and Kops's novel, for all its modest scope, is certainly no exception. At the end of the story Dom is in his bedroom, shooting a skyrocket out of his window. "All was not lost. You could defer the explosion. He would show them yet."



"And, gentlemen, the beauty of this deal is I don't want your souls. . . . Just a seat on your board and a stock option."

# A Gallery of Grotesques

**Honeybuzzard**, by Angela Carter (Simon & Schuster. 185 pp. \$4.50), peoples a grotesque stage with Gothic characters for whom life is a perpetual Witches' Sabbath. Peter L. Sandberg is former editor of *Phoenix Point West* magazine.

By PETER L. SANDBERG

IN ANGELA CARTER's slender first novel we meet a man called Morris, who has a face like an El Greco Christ and is well-intentioned but ineffectual. Though he feels pity for suffering fellow-beings, he can translate it into action only by lifting a drowning spider out of his bathtub. He is married to a beige Victorian woman who wishes that her husband were either good or bad; Morris is really neither. He longs to assert himself, to prove his uniqueness, and does so by ordering meringues for breakfast. His gums bleed constantly.

Honeybuzzard is Morris's friend and business partner, a kind of Gothic beatnik who likes to wear false noses, false ears, and plastic vampire teeth. His sensuous features are set off disquietingly by a red, rapacious mouth. A practical joker, he leaves piles of plastic dog excrement here and there, and hopes for the day when someone will invent an exploding contraceptive. He is amoral and Satanic. He rules his world by cruelty and whim, and laughs at Morris's sense of pity.

One day, Morris tries and fails to make love to the dewy, voracious temptress Ghislaine. Afterward, in a fit of pique, he tells Honeybuzzard to "take her and teach her a lesson." Beautiful Ghislaine soon reappears with a horrible scar down her face, and Morris knows what has happened and writhes under the burden of shared guilt. He tries to escape through fantasy, rationalization, procrastination, and compromise. In the end, cornered by circumstance and Honeybuzzard's terrible descent into madness, he faces a final and ironic choice.

In selecting her central character and theme Miss Carter casts her lot with the familiar. Morris is the ineffectual, impotent scapegoat-victim who has appeared in so much postwar fiction. The outlook is the fashionable one of utter despair. Life, as the author views it, is brutal, cannibalistic, and doomed by depravity. Only imbeciles keep it alive,

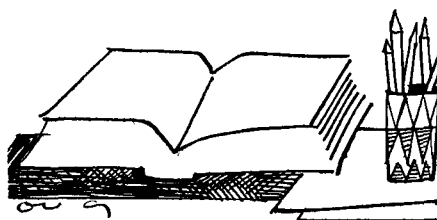
like Honeybuzzard's girl friend Emily, who happily forgets that the child she carries was begotten by a psychopath. As often happens with materials of this sort, the book suffers at times from a lack of restraint, as though the author were not quite sure if she had shocked us sufficiently to drive her point home.

On balance, however, Miss Carter is an exceptionally talented and imaginative writer. She has considerable powers of description, and her catalogues of Victoriana are one of the book's treasures. She sets a grotesque stage and peoples it with characters who are often extravagantly Gothic. She portrays life as a perpetual Witches' Sabbath. She sets up outrageous tensions between her people and suggests many layers of meaning. The reader is suspended between belief and disbelief, crying yes and no with an equal voice.



**Vatican Roulette:** Adam Appleby, whose name is sufficiently absurd to inspire a tentative chuckle, finds himself caught between the grimly opposed worlds of scholarship and domesticity. A Catholic father of three small children and impending author of "The Structure of Long Sentences in Three Modern English Novels," his Ph.D. thesis, Adam drives by scooter from his Battersea home, engulfed by fog, to the airless eyries of the British Museum, where, on the day when we are privileged to observe him, he frets about the delay in his wife's menstrual period. Is she pregnant again? Punctilious Roman Catholics and, therefore, practitioners of the rhythm method, the Applebys, married four years, have already lost three rounds of Vatican Roulette. They are nervously waiting for another miss. This is the *mise en scène* of David Lodge's third book, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$3.95), pretentiously subtitled in the American edition "a modern Catholic novel."

Birth control is, of course, a serious



problem, especially for Roman Catholics; and Lodge has in this *roman à thèse* attempted to deal with it comically, which is probably the wisest way of treating it in fiction. However, the comedy here is embarrassing, often banal. "Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round," trumpets Adam Appleby, who consistently shows that his knowledge of both life and books is severely limited, or, what is even worse, *special*. Adam's wife, Barbara, who has studied French literature as well as the rhythm method, is found with thermometers protruding simultaneously from several apertures in an effort to determine her "safe periods." In a typical witticism Adam refers to her as a "glass porcupine."

Adam's friend Camel, seemingly celibate, is writing a dissertation on "Sanitation in Victorian Fiction," suggesting that the Victorian period is best understood as one of transition "in which the comic treatment of human excretion in the eighteenth century was suppressed, or sublimated in terms of social reform, until it re-emerged as a source of literary symbolism in the work of Joyce and other moderns."

Lodge rarely deviates from this whimsical vein, mining it with a sniggering obstinacy worthy of Beardsley or Firbank. Feeling, quite rightly, that his treatment of birth control cannot sustain a novel, the author provides us with the subsidiary theme of "life imitating art" which runs through the book, yielding dreary parodies of, among others, Conrad, Joyce, Hemingway, and Baron Corvo. We also meet en route such timely writers as Kingsley Anus, C. P. Slow, and John Bane ("The John Bane who wrote *Room at the Top*, or the John Bane who wrote *Hurry On Down*?").

*The British Museum Is Falling Down* is neither a bad good novel nor a good bad novel. Nevertheless David Lodge, though failing in wit, tends to be morally unassailable: his vapid hero commits no rapes, seductions, lewd or indecent acts; and his heroine properly resists condoms, spermicides, diaphragms, and pills. The book, one guesses, is simply a matter of washing clean linen in public.

—EDWARD M. POTOKER.



**Guilty Innocence:** The situation of Y, the protagonist of Peter Israel's first novel, *The Hen's House* (Putnam, \$4.95), is a metaphor of the predicament of man in modern society. Y is comfortably incarcerated in a windowless institution where he is periodically taken from his cell to sessions with his interrogator-analyst, the Hen. What happens in these sessions is a philosophical-psychoanalytical brainwashing, designed to bring