



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Not Who Done It, But Why?

THOMAS BERGER, who wrote a strange sort of Western in *Little Big Man* (SR, Oct. 10, 1964), has now written an even stranger sort of mystery—*Killing Time* (Dial, \$5.95). I first encountered Berger's name in *New American Writing* for the autumn of 1955, which contained a perplexing and fascinating story about postwar Germany, "Confessions of a Giant." This turned out to be part of a novel, *Crazy in Berlin*, which was published in 1958. A sequel, *Reinhart in Love*, appeared in 1962. After that came *Little Big Man*, which was more highly praised by the reviewers than its predecessors and sold more copies.

*Reinhart in Love* begins: "In a shed of unpainted boards, a kind of swollen privy, on a compound of like structures in a field of dirty snow somewhere in Indiana, an anonymous major after an eleventh-hour pitch for the Regular Army or at least the Reserve, bade goodbye to thirty-odd soldiers—among whom was Corporal Carlo Reinhart, 15302320, the oddest of the lot, take it as you would." That is the kind of guy Berger would be interested in writing about.

*Killing Time* gets off to as bloody a start as any mystery fan could ask for. Arthur and Betty Bayson, entering the apartment of Mrs. Andrew Starr, Betty's mother, discover the body of a boarder named Appleton, the nude body of Betty's sister Billie, and, under the bed, the body of Mrs. Starr. Mr. Starr, an alcoholic who is separated from his wife, accidentally appears on the scene in celebration of Christmas Eve, and policemen and reporters follow close behind.

*Little Big Man* was a kind of anti-Western Western; that is, its hero and narrator, Jack Crabb, who claims to be over 100 years old, violates every tradition of Western fiction in telling his story. So *Killing Time* is a mystery without any mystery of the ordinary sort. In the second chapter Berger introduces an eccentric young man named Joe Detweiler, who once boarded at Mrs. Starr's, and the reader immediately and correctly

suspects that Joe is the murderer. (I am giving away no secrets, for Joe's guilt is announced on the book jacket.) The question is not "Who done it?" but "Why?" This is not answered until the end of the novel—if, indeed, it is answered at all.

Once he has given his concise account of the discovery of the corpses and has introduced Joe Detweiler, Berger allows his novel unusual freedom of movement. We meet policemen, reporters, former boarders, neighbors, and the like. One thing leads to another in the casual and sometimes astonishing way we are accustomed to in our daily experience. Some of the characters are developed at length, others drop out of sight almost as soon as they are mentioned. Two police detectives, Tierney and Shuster, run all through the book, and the former becomes a major figure. Another officer appears for only a few pages and then commits suicide offstage. One reporter tries to get a story from Betty Bayson, while two rivals work on the father. There is a striking change in Betty, who really finds herself; and even her namby-pamby husband acquires a little strength.

But the central character is Detweiler, who takes on larger and larger dimensions as the story proceeds. In the brief introductory passage we are told that the morning after the murder Joe got on a subway train and "began his work, which was out of the ordinary." A few pages on we read: "Detweiler's work consisted of helping people to make the most of themselves. He believed the great flaw in the accepted morality was the better-to-give-than-receive principle,



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as a result of which it was a rare person who knew how to accept a kindness, whereas the world was overrun with donors. So what he did to compensate for the imbalance was to travel about among the public and arrange opportunities for total strangers to befriend him." His performance of this program is ingenious, to say the least.

Joe is training himself to get the most out of every moment, but he has a higher ambition than that: "Detweiler looked forward to a time when he could Realize the packing of his clothes, Realize himself upon a train, every detail precise and perfect—fellow passengers, passing landscape, meals in the diner, braking into stations, accelerating out, noises and smells—Realize his arrival at the destination. He would be *there*, without having physically left *here*. Yet if sought here, he would be there in body as well. He would be able to translate himself into a new context, using only the mind." That he has so far failed to develop this power, which he believes will someday be exercised by all human beings, he attributes to his being easily distracted. Since sex is a major distraction, he has gone "to several private doctors and a number of public clinics, with a simple request: that his penis be amputated."

Joe is a nut, and when we meet his mother, who is a working spiritualist, we know that he comes by his nuttiness naturally. But the extraordinary thing about Detweiler, as almost everyone whom he encounters is compelled to admit, is that his arguments are likely to be unanswerable. Tierney, the detective to whom Joe makes his confession, listens "with a peculiar sympathy."

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# From Arson to a Thousand Candles

*From the Ashes: Voices of Watts*, edited by Budd Schulberg (New American Library, 256 pp. \$5.95), to be published later this fall, is an anthology of poetry, essays, short stories, and television scripts drawn from the writers' workshop established by Mr. Schulberg after the violence in Los Angeles two summers ago. Piri Thomas, who has started a creative-writing workshop in East Harlem, is a poet, essayist, playwright, and painter. His autobiographical "Down These Mean Streets" was published last spring.

By PIRI THOMAS

"FROM the ashes, voices of Watts"—what a beautiful realization of the Negro's cry for dignity, a cry not only from the mind but from the soul. This book is to me as close as the aorta through which my heart pumps blood to all parts of my body. It is a freedom cry, expressed in essays, poetry, short stories—the writings of suppressed people who having no alternative (this I know from my own experience) have been forced, yes, literally forced to react no longer as slaves but as men, with trumpets that blare out loud and clear: "Give us the same liberty that you have claimed for yourselves."

In a brief review it is virtually impossible to salute all those who are heard in this anthology of voices from the ghetto—the Watts Writers' Workshop, writers at Douglass House (named for the great Negro, Frederick Douglass)—voices that white Americans would do well to heed. Since 1965 membership in the Watts workshop has grown to more than thirty, and there have been some thirty-five additional applicants. Think of the contribution already made by this small group and how much greater America could be if their achievement could be multiplied by the thousands.

A short biographical sketch precedes each writer's selection in the anthology, and at times the drama in his history communicates almost as much to the reader as the composition itself. Although many themes recur, the overall screaming message is that poverty and denial of dignity warp, embitter, and destroy millions of lives. By some

lovely miracle these "nitty-gritty" writers have been strong enough and articulate enough to write about not only their near defeat in life, but also their faith in ultimate victory.

The individuality of each is particularly evident in the poetry. Guadalupe de Saavedra, the son of Mexican migratory workers, concludes his poem, "The Shoe Shine":

Someday you'll know  
But you won't like it  
Because things are going to change.  
So let me say it once more.

I shore tanks yo', boss.

Johnie Scott attended Harvard College one year and then returned to Watts to write:

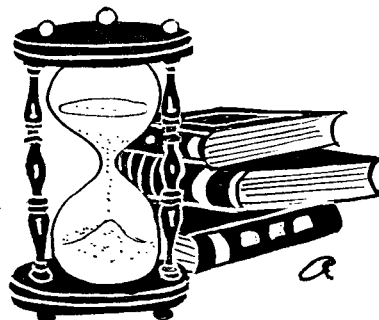
You become a man when  
you stop all of those faces  
from coming out of your  
mouth and begin shaping your  
lips to sing the recognizable  
features of your own past,

and what you know is true.

Jimmie Sherman's poem "Sammy Lee" conveys the same feeling of indignity that I as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican have known. And Blossom Powe's "Black Phoenix" captures the essence of this remarkable book:

Of this black kind of Phoenix  
With trembling hands—  
Crying! Brooding! Trying somehow  
To create . . . a new mosaic  
From broken bricks and charcoal faces!

The young Negro poet Alvin A. Saxon, Jr., who frequently uses the pen name of "Ojenke," gives honor to the writing profession. "Some men satisfy their longings for a better world by escapism, some by defeatism, and some by coming to grips and defining these terms of existence responsible for man's condi-



tions. The latter is my job as a writer."

The poem that brought tears to my eyes, and I mean real tears, was by Birdell Chew, a woman over fifty years old, born in Texas and one of the earliest members of the Watts Writers' Workshop. The poem, "A Black Mother's Plea," closes with these poignant words:

Please do not give my son a reason to hate, so he will destroy himself while he is still a boy. Allow him a chance to fill his heart with love for all mankind, for he was conceived by woman from man, same as the Whites.

Harry Dolan has already achieved well-earned recognition as a writer and playwright. His short story, "I Remember Papa," echoes what I, growing up in Spanish Harlem, and many ghetto youngsters heard from the lips of their parents:

"Be careful, boy, there are so many ways to fail, the pitfall sometimes seems to be the easiest way out. Beware of my future, for you must continue, you must live. You must, for in you are all the dreams of my nights, all the ambitions of my days."

At the same time, I really dug the humor blended with the stark reality of the nitty-gritty in Haley Mims's two short stories, "Passing" and "Maggie."

*From the Ashes* is a monumental work, not of fiction, but in its depiction of the agony and frustration and destruction that have stricken our land. Each of the eighteen writers here represented, along with the others who could not be part of *From the Ashes*, speaks from his or her own heart, yet it is one heart that gives white America another opportunity to listen to the voices of men and women who are determined even unto death that their heritage from America is not to be hunger, pain, sorrow, indignity, and the denial of their full rights as Americans.

A special tribute is due Budd Schulberg for his courage and perseverance in starting the Watts Writers' Workshop and keeping it going. I am sure it will be an inspiration to all such workshops now in existence and yet to be founded all over this country. As Schulberg so eloquently puts it in his introduction:

His single candle may light a thousand thousand candles. And the light and warmth of these candles may help redeem and regenerate the core of the ghetto, that decomposed inner city, waiting either for a phoenix to rise from the ashes, or for bigger and more terrible fires.

Keep swinging, my brothers and sisters in Watts. Keep wailing! We're gonna reach the mountaintop yet.