

is apparently aiming at: most Americans, after all that has been reported about Vietnam, still cannot perceive that the war there is wrong—unproductive, perhaps, but don't talk right and wrong about stopping Communism.

Furthermore, Mr. Briley ignores the ability of human beings to acknowledge explicitly the wrongness of their participation in some larger social process, such as a neo-colonial war abroad or racism at home, and yet go right on participating for reasons of personal advancement, or out of fear of ostracism or worse.

But read Mr. Briley for his explosive accounts of jungle warfare and for his moral passion; the lack of nuances does not get in the way of those worthwhile qualities.

**Gerald Walker**

*Gerald Walker is a novelist and an editor of The New York Times Magazine.*

## FAT CITY

**by Leonard Gardner**

*Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 183 pp., \$5.50*

LEONARD GARDNER'S FIRST NOVEL registers not so much the presence of a new literary voice as the absence of one. It is an exercise in the extinction of personality, despite the urgent call for auctorial comment that seems to come from his two principal subjects, boxing and farm labor.

Of all our body-contact sports, boxing must be an ultimate symbol for the arbitrary cruelty that men have devised in the name of games and play. Of all forms of day labor, work in our massive orchards and vegetable farms must be some last word for the deliberate exploitation that men have justified in the name of economic necessity. Surely there are other, deeper connections between these two varieties of blows to the breadbasket. But if such tie-ups exist, Gardner is silent about them; or, at any rate, his fiction leaves them as barely implicit suggestions. His book is neither a protesting exposé nor an attempt to pinpoint blame. Symbolic organization is not his forte, and his style, as dry and crude as the lives he portrays, is purely functional. His approach is not to interpret, moralize, or reform, but simply to document some burnt-out ends of our society.

His scene is Stockton, California, a port city on the San Joaquin River delta, and he catches it meticulously through the exclusive viewpoints of boxers, gas station attendants, fry cooks, fight managers, winos, and field hands. Trudging through a sleazy wasteland of smelly gyms, run-down

motels, and endless acres of crops come two main characters. Ernie Munger, still in his teens, is a Far Western Studs Lonigan growing up defeated by his thwarted desires—for money, for satisfaction of his body lusts, for independence, for the most basic kind of self-respect. Billy Tully, on the other hand, is near the end of his life at thirty, a lush deserted by his well-stacked wife, his boxing career long over, a man hardly fit now for chopping onions or for whaling away at walnut trees with a great pole. The two men drift, meet fleetingly in training rings or on hiring lines, then drift again. The novel drifts with them. The only line of plot and direction is their steady spiral downward, like fish seen belly up and slowly sinking, who never know how or why their stream was polluted, or what they might have done about it.

If all of this sounds grim and depressing, it is, and yet Gardner's complete surrender to his material gives *Fat City* whatever gripping power it has. In this respect it is reminiscent of another first novel, Steven Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Though it is impossible ever to push beyond the limited thoughts and feelings of these people, they have a raw attraction the more one learns about them. Unexpected complexities unfold like twirlings of a cabbage, particularly when the two heroes are with their women, loving them when least accessible, hating them when they are close and most demanding. Dialogue seems taped and then transcribed to print; background and action are as precise as in good film. What it is like to be there, to feel so low, to be numbered among the disfranchised with nowhere to run—these are Gardner's best effects.

"He has got it exactly right," says one of the testimonials gathered on the book jacket in praise of this first effort. Gardner undoubtedly has. But accuracy in this case can only result in weariness and pain for a reader, as if he too had been working in the fields all day for ninety cents an hour,



**Leonard Gardner—"an exercise in the extinction of personality."**

or had been hit repeatedly by hard lefts to the jaw. As a result, like this reviewer he may yearn for some more transcendent exploration; or for perspective, perhaps, from a voice saying that the agony of these characters is not just self-created, that their conditions are not inevitable, irremediable, and that our best tales are about men strong enough not simply to endure but to fight back—and sometimes almost to win.

**Robert Maurer**

*Robert Maurer, a frequent critic for SR, is chairman of the Literature Department at Antioch College.*

## LOVE, ROGER

**by Charles Webb**

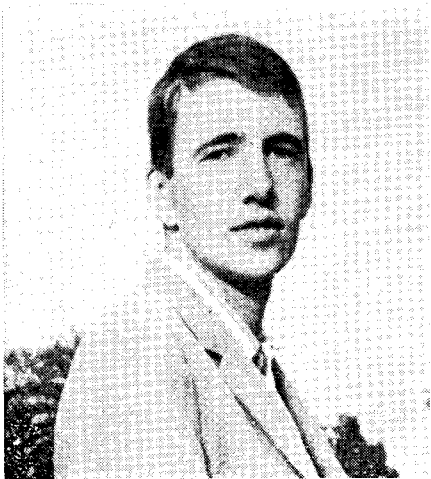
*Houghton Mifflin, 188 pp., \$4.95*

CHARLES WEBB BELONGS TO NO CULT, puts forward no philosophy, and probes no psychologies. His new novel begins when its title character, Roger Hart, talks his way into a big Boston department store at closing time. On his departure a few minutes later, he sees an unconscious girl. By the time he revives her the two are locked in for the night; they make cheeseburgers at the lunch counter and go to bed together in the furniture department.

Adventures like this typify Roger, a college dropout in his early twenties who is working as a travel agent while thinking about the future. He seems to have little control over the major decisions of his life. Nor is he happy when he does try to act. At the store, at the travel agency, at the dog races his attempts at honesty and kindness cause everyone involved a good deal of pain and embarrassment.

Does all this add up to another anti-novel about an anti-hero? It does not. Webb feels for his characters and invites the reader to follow suit. Instead of using his settings as microcosms or symbols, he plants his characters firmly on the page and moves them around rhythmically. He makes us want to know what they are going to do next. *Love, Roger* is a human novel about fallible humans trying to get together humanly.

As in *The Graduate*, Webb's uncannily realistic dialogue carries most of the weight of the book's theme. He makes speech a living process. He catches the hesitations and the stoppages, the repetitions and the missed meanings of everyday talk. Characters speak for reasons other than communicating information; they try to protect themselves, to unburden themselves, or to touch each other. Often a remark does not answer the one that went before it. Nevertheless,



Charles Webb—"uncannily realistic."

the characters sometimes know each other better after a few pages of dialogue even though they have not conversed in the usual sense. Again, the words that fall between them may show the hopelessness of their coming together at all. Here is Webb conveying through talk the groping and the unreason that go into making human contact:

"Did you have a dinner engagement?"

"Yes."

"I didn't have an engagement," I said, "but I usually eat around six."

"That's a good time to do it."

"I get hungry then."

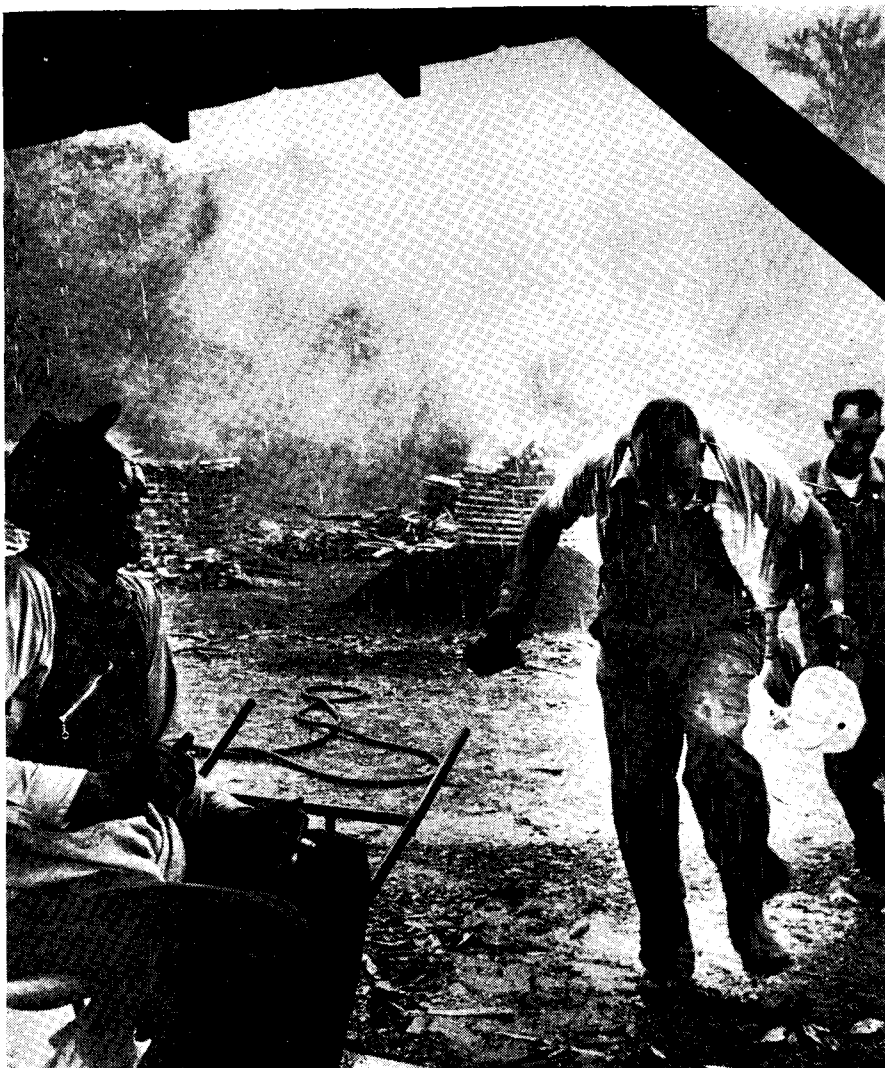
"I usually eat around six-forty-five or seven. Sometimes later."

The novel's weak point is its texture. For all its rightness, Webb's dialogue does not mesh with the long, unbroken blocks of print that recount the details of Roger's daily routine—cleaning the office, walking home from work, getting ready for bed. These slow-moving passages, besides creating problems in cadencing, neither develop the plot nor help us know Roger any better.

Yet, in the main, the book goes down smoothly. *Love, Roger* is a surface novel that escapes superficiality. Writing with both rhythm and control, Webb tells his story through speech and physical movement rather than through psychological analysis. A useful comparison may be Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. Both stories describe their characters objectively, both center around a groping young man, and both have a sure, light tone that adapts well to cinema. What is most important, both say something important about human relationships.

Peter Wolfe

Peter Wolfe teaches English at the University of Missouri in St. Louis.



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