

SUCH GOOD FRIENDS

by Lois Gould

Random House, 277 pp., \$6.95

Reviewed by Joel Lieber

■ Last year Alex Portnoy made it official: little boys masturbate. And several hundred thousand young, educated American males warmly identified with the funny, poignant, painful literary display of that fact. This year, a book for their wives: Lois Gould's. Little girls masturbate, too; moreover, big grown-up mommies masturbate. Mrs. Gould also tells us that they consume Dexamyl by the handful and read Krafft-Ebing in bed while eating Sara Lee fudge cake.

Such Good Friends is more personal and honest and graphic than *Portnoy's Complaint*. But Philip Roth's crazy, hilarious irony is one thing: Lois Gould's depressive, desperately unhappy bitterness, another. Like Roth's, her novel may induce tears—but not from laughing.

Julie Messinger's life falls apart the day she discovers her husband's little black book, with its symbols for his mistresses and the dates and frequency of orgasm with them during the decade that he has engaged in extramarital affairs Julie has known nothing about. She happens upon the book while her husband is dying in a hospital, a victim of some bizarre medical incompetence.

Simply because he's her husband and father of their two boys, Julie wants Richard to recover but she also wants him *dead* because she hates him. Indeed, her hatred is so all-consuming that one soon gets disgusted with Julie's hard-as-nails, iceberg commentary: "Dozens, maybe hundreds, of excited or worried, love- or duty- or conscience-driven curious or morbid people, all of whom, incredibly, incredibly, wanted to give of their life's blood to Richard Messinger. They were jammed into the waiting rooms, lining the corridors, teetering on the radiators, and still coming; it was like Friday night outside the Cinema Rendezvous. What could possibly be playing? *Coma*. Starring Somebody You Really Know!" So ugly and insistent is Julie's contemptuousness that I began to wish *she* would die and Richard would live.

But, no matter how unlikable she grows, Julie is real. She lives nextdoor. We see her every day on the street or in the supermarket or at parties. From the look in her eyes we suspect something is wrong, but probably we have never been told just what is wrong in such agonizing and uninhibited detail. Among her revelations are female equivalents of Alex Portnoy's about his use of raw liver. What some men find offensive in *Such Good Friends* is just this kind of intimate disclosure. Women aren't supposed to have equal sexual and human rights—and *talk* about them as openly as men. Lois Gould's frantic, cruel recital of modern middle-class woman's lot is an imaginative chapter in the feminist struggle. It is also another of the many recent signposts of social and psychological and political change going on.

Julie's dying husband is a sweet bastard but no more so than many men. She is a self-proclaimed "cool, heartless bitch," a masochistic, masturbating, self-hating, pill-popping, orgasmless, resentful, scorned woman like whom hell hath no fury. (And very likely only a woman can really understand the fury of her fury.) She is a racist. She is crazily materialistic. A morbid, pathetic, Feiffer cartoon girl trying to tell us what it's like to feel trapped and dead inside. It does no good to call Julie Messinger insensitive and tactless. Her life is loveless and barren, the friends around her loveless and insensitive and tactless. She doesn't know how she got into her uptight, jammed-up mess, nor how to break out of it: the whole depressing chaos started so long ago for her, as it has for others. How many Julie Messingers are out there now, trying to find some point for the absurd catastrophe of their lives?

Even though this is her first novel, Lois Gould writes as idiomatically and naturally and truthfully as an old pro.



—Abramovitz.

Lois Gould—"more graphic than 'Portnoy's Complaint.'"

And, notwithstanding the curious unconscious insensitivity of its acutely sensitive author, *Such Good Friends* is an important, awful, believable book. Many men will resent it, but the novel will change the lives of many women. Certainly, I don't see how the marriage of any couple can be the same after they have read it.

Joel Lieber is the author of the novels "Move" and "The Chair." A forthcoming book, "The Circle Game," will soon be published by Simon & Schuster.

FRASER YOUNG LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1409

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1409 will be found in the next issue.

FOBI FOR VCO EO C VEB-
BEFO TOARNGMCOAG MQR
EOMRNOCMEFOCB GEMTCME-
FO. EGO'M EM FAA QFL IFT
PRRS NTOOEIX EOMF QEV?

—LEBBECV OEYQFBG

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1408

When women kiss, it always reminds me of prize fighters shaking hands.
—H. L. MENCKEN.

GENERATION OF RUST

by Endre Fejes, translated from the Hungarian by Sanford J. Greenburger and Teranece Brashear

McGraw-Hill, 215 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Robert Maurer

■ A saying in Hungary has it that of the country's ten million inhabitants, nine million are writers. Whatever basis in actual fact there may be for this adage, it must indicate something about how intensely committed the nation is to literary culture. Yet, beyond Hungarian borders probably few people could identify the names, much less the callings, of Tibor Déry and Magda Szábo, novelists; Sandor Weöres, poet, or even George Lukács, who has gained some renown as a Marxist critic. Isolated by its language and its fenced-in position between Communist and Western spheres of influence, Hungary as a literary culture escapes our notice almost entirely, even when (as in the revolution of 1956, which was sparked by a circle of writ-

ers and intellectuals) the nation becomes part of our global political battleground.

Generation of Rust apparently has broken down those barriers of isolation, at least on the Continent. If the jacket copy can be believed, Endre Fejes's first novel, published in 1962, was "one of the most . . . heralded books to appear in Europe since World War II." American readers may find this strange, and it seems unlikely that the novel will ever receive the attention here given to other Continental novels—for example, Günter Grass's portrait of Poles in *The Tin Drum*, or C. Virgil Gheorghiu's depiction of wartime and postwar Rumanians in *The Twenty-fifth Hour*—that have dealt with the same kind of subject: the history of a family charted over a vast expanse of time and momentous events.

Generation of Rust has neither the robust technical virtuosity of Grass's novel nor the caustic, highly debatable political philosophizing of Gheorghiu's. In fact, this chronicle of the Habetler clan of Budapest from World War I to 1962 is in most respects an utterly bland performance. Its style, the translators note, is deliberately poverty-stricken to a point approaching illiteracy. There are no symbolic patterns, no puzzling complications of plot or character, no underlying layers of significance. If Fejes has a viewpoint, he seems to have surrendered it to his material. Even history is shoved into a distant background: when, during the last war, one character is asked what he will do if the "Bolsheviks" sweep away the sacred fatherland, he replies that the idea has never occurred to him. The only communist the Habetlers encounter at close hand is a ridiculous functionary. The 1956 revolution is for them little more than a rattle of guns, a source of incomprehensible fears.

What, then, can account for the book's attraction? One answer could

be that while Fejes appears noncommittal, he is actually wishing a plague on all our political houses and on all Hungary's successive occupying forces, simply by underplaying their effects on normal, everyday life. Such guile and cynicism are not beyond the modern Hungarian temperament, nor beyond contemporary European disillusionment. Another answer could be that readers were shocked into recognizing how far they have moved from the settled, pious, rural innocence of the old days. As this story begins, the original Habetlers slave away all week in a small village in order to pluck their zithers on Sunday after church. In the Budapest of 1970 their children are godless, play strip poker, marry trombone players, diddle with casual affairs before and after their divorces, and murder a relative in the yard of a metal works, a cemetery of rust. The last image frames the corruption of a generation.

But, aside from any thematic interest the novel may have, there is the sheer relentless pull of watching simple people endure through time, and it is surely this that will provide the appeal for American readers. To them the succession of disconnected, almost cinematographic happenings in the Habetlers' lives will at first seem flat, overdetailed, pointless. As acquaintance grows, so does involvement, until one realizes that here is a novel like Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, fixed firmly in a tradition, skillful in its portrait of decadence. Its intrinsic virtues are not sufficient to make it so important a book as Mann's, but Fejes's classical restraint and his absolute fidelity to the Habetler experiences make *Generation of Rust* a worthy introduction to Hungary's millions of unacclaimed writers.

Robert Maurer is chairman of the Literature Department at Antioch.

SPECTOR

by Marc Davis

Scribners, 244 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Nicholas A. Samstag

■ This book craves affection. You want to like it. For one thing, it might—just might—be based on the life of Lenny Bruce, in the sense at least that those penny-dreadful who-wuz-its might be about Howard Hughes or Jane Russell or (for all we know) Mickey Mantle, even though they can't be about any real body at all. But the possibility of Lenny Bruce is important, because everybody loves Lenny Bruce now that it's too late to do him any good.

For another thing, the volume is distinctly odd, and that's a good thing. The right-hand margins are unjustified. Certain peculiar words and phrases keep popping up: an improbable number of things remind the first-person narrator (Steve Spector, *né* Spector-sky, a sick comic) of "vermiculated wood"; a "Gordian knot" is tied or untied at least twice; "acidulous" is a fine word to sink your teeth into and the author does, quite a few times.

Spector is undergoing a sort of identity crisis, the chief symptom of which seems to be a tendency to bolt from the nightclub stage in mid-act, hurling imprecations at the audience. He breaks up with his girl, takes up with another, endures (in the most moving scenes of the book) his mother's death, and resumes his professional life with the apparent conviction that things will, somehow, get better. The end.

There are too many aimless soliloquies throughout, and the vignettes of a nightclub comedian's daily grind are neither coherent nor convincing. Spector's ambivalent relationship with his lovable-but-corrupt Jewish agent (would you believe "Izzy"?), and his new girl (Pandora) are trite and awkwardly realized. Scenes purporting to take place in Greenwich Village wouldn't fool a twelve-year-old A-Trainer.

But, for all these faults, there just aren't that many books that might be about Lenny Bruce.

Nicholas A. Samstag is an editorial writer for the *Providence Journal*.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1 If, *Moby Dick*. 2Jg, *Jew of Malta*. 3Ad. 4He, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. 5Li, *Cask of Amontillado*. 6Kj. 7Ek, *Aeneid*. 8Ch. 9Db, *Bacchae*. 10 Fc, *Lord of the Flies*. 11 Ga, *Sign of the Four*. 12Bl, *Suddenly Last Summer*.

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