

against my house. Silence and the meaningless chirp of birds, the scraw of lizards behind the pictures on the wall.

Like that other prodigiously gifted and facile writer John Updike, Theroux at times lets his prose get away from him, but such lapses are a lot rarer in *The Consul's File* than they were in *The Family Arsenal*. There are dangers, too, in bringing together interrelated stories originally published in different magazines, inconsistency chief among them. On page four Theroux tells us, "The town was some shops, the Club, the mission, the dispensary, the Methodist school, my consulate"; and on page seven he writes, "A road, some gum trees, a row of shop-houses, three parked cars: Ayer Hitam was that small. . . ."

But that's a niggling complaint. *The Consul's File* is first-rate Theroux: funny, knowing, ironic, oddly compassionate. It further embellishes his deservedly high reputation. ©

Books in Brief

Justice Crucified:

The Story of Sacco and Vanzetti

by Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht
McGraw-Hill, 480 pp., \$15

The Never-Ending Wrong

by Katherine Anne Porter
Atlantic-Little, Brown, 63 pp., \$5.95

Even routine discussions of Sacco and Vanzetti deserve attention, for their tragedy is of rare importance in the international struggle for human rights. The recent declaration of a Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial Day by Governor Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts to remove "any stigma and disgrace" from the names of the two men coincides with the publication of two books that mark the fiftieth year since the Italian immigrants were refused a retrial and electrocuted for murders they most likely did not commit. Each makes a persuasive, significant, and very different contribution to the Sacco and Vanzetti legacy.

Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht writes an acute appreciation of the sensibilities and world view of unwanted immigrants and political outsiders. She sets the injustice done to Sacco and Vanzetti firmly in the Massachusetts of 1927, within the long, scarred American tradition of racial hate

and fear of the foreign-born, a tradition implanted by the Puritans and carried on by their heirs up through the great migrations of the nineteenth century and the terrors of the Palmer raids of 1920. She argues her thesis that both men were innocent with hard logic and an alert reading of the trial transcripts. Her writing is forceful and her wit, acid. The trial, the appeals, and the last days advance with mounting dramatic tension. Foremost among the new sources are many of Vanzetti's Italian letters, printed here in English for the first time.

The young Katherine Anne Porter worked for one of the defense committees in the final, distraught stage of the appeals process, marched in picket lines, and was jailed. She now publishes a brief memoir rescued from her neglected notes of the time. Not always coherent, random and shifting as memory itself, it gains power and reveals some indelible pictures: of Luigia Vanzetti looking with horror into the faces in the crowd raging at a rally for her doomed brother; of the midnight vigil outside Charlestown prison, where the men were being put to death; of a "party" afterward, wakelike, desperate, and charged with guilt and anger.

—JOHN FLUDAS

Players

by Don DeLillo
Knopf, 224 pp., \$7.95

Players is a fascinating little subtracting machine, a precision calculator of spiritual entropy. Like Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, DeLillo's novel is a New York book—sets by *The New Yorker*, people by Barthelme, fears by the *Daily News*. Stockbroker Lyle and grief therapist Pammy, both in their early thirties, play at being married the way pensioners play at poker without stakes. They breathe in boredom and exhale anxiety. He memorizes recorded comedy routines and she buys fruit as a gesture of "moral excellence." When Lyle drifts into a terrorist group that wants to blow up the stock exchange and Pammy goes to Maine with a gay couple, the ante is raised, but these new games also disolve and fold into loss.

What makes this familiar material fascinating is DeLillo's dual perspective: he is a sensor inside the characters and a distant scientist converting signals into information. While Lyle and Pammy process (and reduce) a world they're trying to enlarge with adventure, DeLillo decodes

both actions. The prose knows how experience turns into abstraction and how people become channels, how plot fades to probabilities and place empties into space, how little becomes less. DeLillo isn't writing sociology or satire, but the equations for what one character calls "the sensual pleasures of banality." His is no easy investigation, yet *Players* is both original and final, a new formula for the familiar.

—THOMAS LECLAIR

White Book

by Pavel Kohout

Translated from the German by Alex Page
George Braziller, 215 pp., \$8.95

Though cast in the form of futurist fantasy, this brilliant satire on political topsy-turvydom zeroes in on Czechoslovakia today.

One morning, Adam Juracek, a professor in the resort town of "K.," walks on the ceiling of his bedroom, thus by sheer will-power invalidating the law of gravity. His repetition of this cataclysmic feat in a crowded ballroom creates delight among the young, consternation among bureaucrats (academics included), and panic in the government, which declares a national emergency. Juracek is imprisoned, tried, and sent to a mental institution for treatment. Relays of psychiatrists fail to uncover the source of his antigravitational powers but do succeed in reducing him to a state of "truly exemplary apathy," and when he is released from their clutches years later, he can remember nothing but his identification number.

Pavel Kohout, a Czech playwright and novelist unpublished in his homeland, tells us these events were "reconstructed" in the twenty-first century, some 50 years after they occurred. At bottom his story is about the insanities, at once frightening and comic, that afflict a society premised on the assumption that truth is the servant of politics. He dramatizes them here with a dazzling combination of intellectual rigor and comic inventiveness, explicitly invoking Galileo and the religious martyr Jan Hus, implicitly invoking Kafka, Alexander Dubček, and all that we've learned to associate with the "merciless, uniform footsteps of hobnailed boots."

It's a major literary comment on the present Czech government in particular and on socialist irrationalism in general, too dense with allusions and ironies for easy reading, but richly worthwhile.

—PETER GARDNER



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