

devotion to beauty, the desire to explore, and an acceptance of responsibility. And though the virtues win out, he is not guilty of bypassing the bleak.

Helprin's freewheeling use of fantasy at times eclipses his essential seriousness, diminishing the novel as a whole. Yet there is unquestionable genius in the book's marvelous individual pieces. Whether one likes *Winter's Tale* or not, one cannot fail to be transfixed by the utter exuberance of Helprin's imagination. ■

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## BOOK BRIEFS

### **A Gathering of Old Men**

by Ernest J. Gaines

Alfred A. Knopf, 215 pp., \$13.95

BEAU BOUTAN, a Cajun farmer, is lying dead on a Louisiana plantation. Candy Marshall, the plantation's feisty overseer, proclaims herself the murderess as the community's elderly black farmers gather around her, each having shot one shell from his shotgun, each also claiming responsibility for Beau's death. This begins the story of a day in which the South's old order falls, through a series of stunning occurrences. For the dozen or so black men—Mat, Chimley, Tee Jack, Dirty Red, and the rest—barely able to carry their own guns, this may be the last chance in their inactive lives to do something worthwhile.

In earlier works such as *Bloodline* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines established himself as chronicler of the black American experience. Here he does not reserve his compassion solely for his ragtag band of impromptu soldiers. Even as we learn of the unspeakable horrors the dead man's father and his henchmen have inflicted upon their black neighbors, we are made to pity this bewildered Boutan patriarch. Mapes, the sheriff, earns some sympathy as he vainly tries to prevent the inevitable confrontation between the vengeful Boutans and the murderer. But the story moves beyond sentimentality and becomes a celebration of old age, for it is in old age that the

black men find the strength to act and produce equality, where laws and demonstrations have failed.

Gaines eloquently describes the strata of our supposedly classless society. This novel is both a study of that society and a vivid description of a region still haunted by memories of a legendary aristocracy, a region peopled by blacks and whites each seeking to endure rather than to prevail.

—TERESA LUNEAU

### **Wonderful Fool**

by Shusako Endo

translated by Francis Mathy

Harper & Row, 237 pp., \$13.95

LITERATURE IS littered with Christ figures—Melville's Billy Budd, Dos- toyevsky's Prince Myshkin, Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes. Shusako Endo adds one more to the list: Gaston Bonaparte, a hulking, hopelessly idealistic Frenchman who arrives in postwar Japan determined to renew the communal spirit of the Japanese. Unlike his ancestor Napoleon, he tries to prevail by turning the other cheek, but he gets kicked, slapped, and finally knocked out cold by the various low-life characters he encounters. They can't figure out what to make of a man who trusts in human goodness and refuses to fight back. Is he a saint, or a fool? Or is he a fool because he remains saintly in a world inhospitable to saintliness?

Endo wrote *Wonderful Fool* in the late 1950s after a serious illness forced him to give up postgraduate study in France and return to his homeland. He was a devout Catholic, a rarity in a country of Shintoists and Buddhists. The strength of Endo's novel is the skill with which he uses the details of his own life to dramatize the malaise of postwar Japanese society. His gentle French giant, Gaston, spends most of his time in Japan pursuing a tubercular Japanese gangster named Endo. Endo, the character, spends most of his time trying to avenge the death of his brother, who was executed for war crimes on the perjured testimony of his fellow soldiers. Gaston tries, with mixed success, to lead Endo out of vengeance into grace.

Prostitutes, fortunetellers, and corporate middle managers all find their way into Endo's sprightly, picaresque tale. Yet his light touch is deceptively firm, his comic eye tempered with a keen sense of human suffering. If you

have been thinking of looking into modern Japanese fiction, *Wonderful Fool* is a fine place to start.

—ADAM GUSSOW

### **Meditations in Green**

by Stephen Wright

Scribners, 362 pp., \$14.95

THIS IS A LOOK at the Vietnam War through the eyes of a man on drugs, a hybrid hallucination of the evening news and *Apocalypse Now*. Impressionistic glimpses of characters who appear and disappear, or reappear to die in battle or accident, add to the hallucinatory tone of the story of Spec. 4 James Griffin (1069th Intelligence Unit).

Intercut with scenes showing the war's boredom and terror are first-person accounts of Griffin's postwar life: more drug taking, visits from a friend bent on tracking down a hated sergeant, attempts to meditate like a plant (as suggested by a friend in the "pacification business").

This is not *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *The Naked and the Dead*. There is little characterization, traditional plot line, heroism, or morality. What Wright has done is meticulously depict a disordered mind and what caused it. He does not express a point of view or insight into what occurred as much as he conveys what the war felt like. For this he received the Charles Scribner's Sons Maxwell Perkins Prize for "a first novel of exceptional promise about the American experience." Wright does show exceptional promise. But readers who saw enough of the Vietnam horror on the evening news may want to wait for his next novel.

—PAMELA FEINSILBER

### **My Last Sigh**

by Luis Bunuel

Alfred A. Knopf, 288 pp., \$15.95

THE WORK OF Bunuel, though frequently banned and censored, sends critics and viewers into rapturous contemplation of its irrational, unforgettable images, some of the most famous in the history of the cinema. For the viewer who has delighted in Bunuel's world—where sexual perversity, cruelty, and ignorance are distributed judiciously among all classes—there has always been an impish, even innocent mischievousness behind all those barbed attacks at church and state.

The black humor, the playfulness, and the pleasure of Bunuel's greatest films are also to be found in this straightforward, anecdotal autobiography, with its all-too-accurate title (Bunuel died only two months before the book was published). Though not for the reader who wishes to understand Bunuel's haunting images, *My Last Sigh* goes far to reveal the mind that conceived them.

Bunuel emerges from his autobiography neither as the pretentious symbol-maker nor as the blasphemous fiend that Italy proclaimed him after the release of *Viridiana*. He emerges instead as an immensely likable, modest man with a wicked sense of humor that leaves no taboo unexamined. "When I reached the age of 60," he writes, "I finally understood the perfect innocence of the imagination. 'Fine,' I used to say to myself. 'So I sleep with my mother. So what?'"

As a young man, his sharp irreverence threw him into the arms of the surrealists in Paris, where Salvador Dali, Man Ray, André Breton, Max Ernst, and Tristan Tzara were his friends and mentors. While the audacity of the surrealists fueled Bunuel's love of mystery and adventure, their infighting and posturing finally drove him away.

He writes also of Hollywood, the Spanish Civil War, and Mexico, in short, of all the places and experiences that inspired the elusive images and preposterous situations that make up his body of work. For those who appreciated him, *My Last Sigh* is a succor for the loss. —LAURIE WINER

**The Circus of Dr. Lao**  
by Charles G. Finney  
Vintage, 119 pp., \$3.95

THE FIRST PERSON to notice something strange about the circus coming to Abalone, Arizona, is the proofreader of the advertisement that promises, among other wonders, a mermaid, a sea serpent, and a unicorn. But it is not false advertising; the creatures turn out to be prosaically real. We see through the creatures' eyes, and they seem less peculiar than the citizens who gawk at them. The author describes the everyday as though it were unfamiliar—as though life itself were being proofread.

*The Circus of Dr. Lao* won the

American Booksellers Association's Most Original Novel award in 1936, but it appears to have been a novel of almost unassimilable originality—like its subject, a novelty as much as a novel. Consequently, it has gone in and out of print ever since. Edward Hoagland, in a savvy, circus-loving foreword, blames its size: "The book's shortness probably explains why it is not better known, compared to bulkier underground classics." But Nathaniel West's *The Day of the*

*Locust*, to which Hoagland compares *Dr. Lao*, is similarly slim yet widely read. The difference is that West fits in with the social realists of his day and the glorification of Hollywood tawdriness that followed, while Finney, the literary counterpart of the painter Henri Rousseau, has no precursors and no progeny. His compact masterpiece endures in its singularity, in an obscurity as fantastic as anything Dr. Lao brings to Abalone.  
—ANNA SHAPIRO

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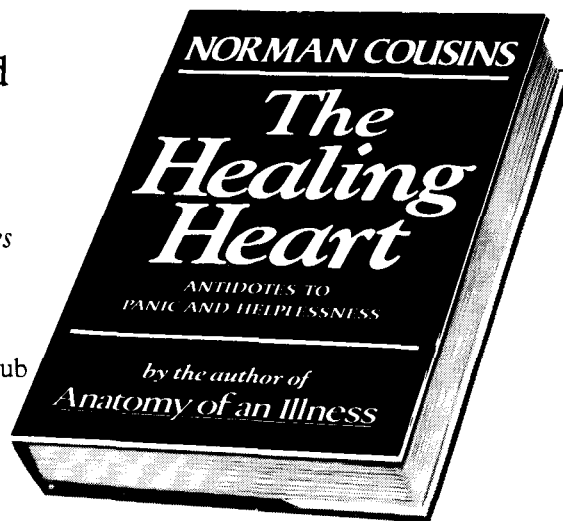
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