

## BOOKS

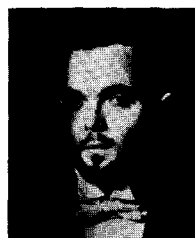
# ANNE RAMPLING'S



## EXIT TO EDEN A NOVEL

### JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

*Saturday Review* has selected Mel Odom's design for *Exit to Eden* (Arbor House) as the best recent book jacket art. Odom grew up in Ahoskie, North Carolina. He graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University and attended Leeds Polytechnic Institute for Art and Design in England. Odom has published two collections of his work: *First Eyes*, which was published in Japan, and *Dreamer*, which was recently published by Penguin in America. His work has been exhibited in New York and Japan. Anne Rampling, coincidentally, is one of his favorite novelists.



### PRESIDENTIAL POSE

Franklin Delano Roosevelt perpetrated a hoax on the American public and on himself about the true extent of his handicap, according to the book *FDR's Splendid Deception* (Dodd, Mead, 265 pp., \$16.95), to be published on the fortieth anniversary of his death this month.

Written by Pulitzer Prize nominee Hugh Gregory Gallagher, a polio paraplegic, the book makes a strong case that polio was the critical factor that shaped FDR's political and private life. The paralysis was his only experience with defeat.

The book looks at FDR with a unique perspective—as a massively crippled president who led a nation back to strength after it was crippled economically by the Depression and crippled militarily by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

FDR went to elaborate lengths, including building ramps for public appearances, so it would seem that the president could walk and was only a bit lame. However, he could not stand or even hobble without braces and very firm physical support. He turned his four sons into virtual crutches for him.

"Crippled or not, the nation wanted this man, with all his magnificent qualities, as its leader. So an agreement was struck: the existence of FDR's handicap would simply be denied by all. The people would pretend that their leader was not crippled, and their leader would do all that he could not to let them see that he was . . . The nation wanted to believe its Emperor was clothed, and it simply would not hear otherwise."

The press complied in the deception and rarely mentioned the infirmity, even when he "crashed over like a tree" at least three times in public. The most serious fall occurred at the 1936 Democratic nominating convention, but aides rushed to hide him and pick him up, and he delivered his "Rendezvous with Destiny" speech to the cheers of 100,000 supporters.

The book shows one of the world's most powerful leaders in moments of abject physical helplessness, like being stranded in his White House bedroom very late one night, unable to prepare for bed because his valet had fallen into a drunken sleep.

Another time, when the president was

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on a foggy fishing trip, he was almost caught with his pants down—literally—by a convoy of ships. FDR was taking a poop off the poop deck because it was too difficult to be carried up and down the boat's ladders to the head. The heavy fog began to lift as the convoy approached. FDR said, "They can't see the president like this," as his sons hustled him, pants down, out of sight.

The book also reveals that FDR was even more severely crippled emotionally than physically: For days at a time, "it was noon before he could pull himself out of depression and greet his guests wearing his lighthearted facade," his secretary, Missy LeHand, once confided. LeHand and FDR's children note that he was close to no one, "incapable of a personal friendship," although he insisted on never being alone, even during physical therapy sessions.

The book also touches upon FDR's sexual potency but voluntary celibacy for the last thirty years of his life.

The Oxford-educated author, like his subject, splendidly deceives himself by being far more adventurous than most people.

Gallagher campaigned throughout Alaska, partially by dog sled, as top aide to former Senator Edward Bartlett, who was too ill to do it himself. During a solo flight in Alaska, the single engine failed and Gallagher crash-landed safely, only to drive into a moose on the airport road. Although Gallagher got the better of the moose in that confrontation, he was almost injured by a rhinoceros on a later tour of a Kenya game park. He has traveled alone around the world, including an inspection tour of Vietnam.

Gallagher drafted the law that now requires public buildings to be accessible to the disabled. He has won a Kennedy Institute grant for his book in progress on the ethical issues concerning the handicapped.

—Marsha Dubrow

### **Less Than Zero**

by BRET EASTON ELLIS

Simon & Schuster, 183 pp., \$15.95

LESS THAN ZERO MAY BECOME A FAMOUS novel. It's being talked about as *Bright Lights, Big City West*. Whether it will be

famous for Andy Warhol's proverbial fifteen minutes or somewhat longer remains to be seen. This first novel is causing a stir for many reasons, the author's age chief among them (Ellis is a twenty-year-old junior at Bennington). Already the dreaded expression "voice of a new generation" is being tossed around.

*Less than Zero* is the story of Clay, a young man returning to his Los Angeles home for Christmas break after a first semester at an Eastern college. Instead of beer busts and bust jokes, Ellis shows us an L.A. youth subculture in which children learn of their parents' whereabouts by checking *Variety*, where blowtorches are used to freebase cocaine, gay male porno movie stars have girlfriends, psychiatrists coerce their teenage patients into optioning the shrink's scripts, and gang S&M rapes of twelve-year-olds are the diversions between ceaseless ingestion of drugs and MTV. Welcome to California.

This is a weirdly fascinating book. You don't so much read it as you do watch and listen to it unfold. *Less than Zero* is not perfect—depravity can only carry a book so far. The deliberate monotone proves that there can be too much of a good thing. And you sometimes get the feeling that chunks of this book were lifted whole from the high melodrama and adolescent angst of Ellis's diary. But *Less than Zero* is a book you simply don't forget. One can only hope that Ellis did not simply follow the writer's maxim of

"writing what you know," but is, instead, a major new contributor to American fiction.

—Larry McCarthy

### The contributors to this month's Book Review section:

Bruce Allen is a frequent reviewer for *Saturday Review*.

David Cowart teaches English at the University of South Carolina and has authored books on John Gardner and Thomas Pynchon.

Jerome Cramer is a Washington freelance writer whose areas of speciality include education and literature.

Dennis Drabelle is a Washington-based lawyer and writer.

Marsha Dubrow is a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *USA Today*, *New York*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and many other publications.

Steven Kellman is professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas, San Antonio, and author of *The Self-Begetting Novel* and *Love Reading: Erotics of the Text*.

Larry McCarthy is a New York writer.

Diana McLellan has written a gossip column for ten years, currently for the *Washington Times*, where it appears as "Diana Hears." It is syndicated nationally as "The Ear."

Alexander Stille is a staff reporter for the *National Law Journal* and spent two years working for an Italian publishing house in Milan, Italy.

Brandon Sweitzer is managing director of Europe and Latin America for Marsh & McLennan Inc.

Thomas Swiss is a poet and critic teaching at Drake University. His book, *Measure*, is forthcoming from the University of Alabama Press.

Bruce VanWyngarden is the former senior editor of *Saturday Review*. SR

