

BOOKS



LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN by
Hubert Selby, Jr., Grove Press,
New York, 1964, \$5.00.

Last Exit to Brooklyn, a collection of short stories of varying length about life and death and violence and lust and squalor and ambition in a great city in one of the world's most progressive and enlightened countries, is, indeed a frightening book. It is not a book for the squeamish nor the easily shocked; at times it may re-

quire sheer determination just to keep on reading it but even more to lay it aside for long.

Most of the men in these stories are brutes or thugs or faggots; most of the women are whores or slatterns or exhausted beaten wives who might better be whores. All are struggling in some perverted way to achieve some kind of destiny. There are both pathos and meaning in their struggles, but their choice of goals—twisted and perverted—fills us with a feeling of horror which is greater than the horror induced by the violence of the action itself. For Georgette, a transvestite faggot, her great and rather touching romantic ambition is to make it with Vinnie, a neighborhood tough—but not just to make it, but to be loved and to walk hand in hand with him in the twilight; for Tralala, who thinks her enormous breasts make her irresistible to any man, suc-

cess is to make it as a whore; for Harry Black, union shop steward, happiness is to succeed as a bully and to make it as a queer; for Abraham, a flashy colored man who drives a Cadillac and has his nails manicured while his children are suffering from malnutrition, prestige is to make it as a cocksman; for Lucy, life is just to keep clean and to try to live decently. For all of them, their seeking leads only to nothingness, despair, or senseless violence, and all of them live in a world of excess where every pleasure becomes a vice and every human feeling becomes either weakness or ugly passion; ambition becomes lust, and courage becomes brutality.

Each of these stories is, in itself, well planned, and Selby displays considerable artistry both in his construction and in the selection of the details he relates with relentless precision. It is hard to know where reality leaves off and fiction begins. In fact, we may hope desperately that Selby is writing pure fiction, but we are plagued by the nagging fear that what he writes is not fiction at all.

Two of the six stories in this volume are concerned primarily with homosexuals and homosexuality, but just as all of this world which Selby describes is a world apart, so his homosexuals too are a world apart, but still we clearly recognize them as being fellow creatures. For those who think that the gay party as it has been heretofore depicted in literature is a stereotype, I suggest that "The Queen is Dead" will provide both shock and a real surprise. The longest story in the book, "Strike," is really two stories in one. One of these stories, fascinating for its revelations of machinations of a powerful union, concerns a strike against a large manufacturing company; the other story is of the awakening of a latent homosexual. Either story might have been told by itself and have been com-

plete, but as they are related here, the second grows out of the first, and so the two are artistically blended. The second story, that of Harry Black's metamorphosis, begins with his physical rape of his wife—an act which he commits regularly in revenge for her rape of his psyche—and in every detail leading to his final emergence as a cocksucker is a powerful tale which reveals an insight into man's sexuality which psychiatrists might and moralists should envy.

It is a basic rule in logic, as well as in grammar, that comparisons can be made only between comparable things. I hesitate, therefore, even to suggest a comparison between *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and John Rechy's *City of Night*. On one level, however, comparison is inevitable. *Last Exit to Brooklyn's* homosexual characters, like Rechy's, are faggots and queens, hustlers and johns, and both books deal with homosexuality as it exists on a certain level of society. There are basic differences between the two books, however, and the differences are far more important than their similarities. *City of Night*, though realistic in detail and in the impression it creates, is basically a story of romantic pathos and sentimentality. *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, though not without pathos, is pure naturalism. Even more important is the fact that whereas Rechy, and this was unfortunate, seemed to say "this is the homosexual world," Selby does not say this at all; he says "this is Brooklyn."

Mr. Selby has a magnificent perception of the sounds of speech and the flow of language. To record on paper what he actually hears, he has devised what is largely his own system of orthography and punctuation. For those of us who forget that language is first of all speech and only secondarily and artificially what we see on the printed page, this system is at times annoying and even bewildering.

Here and there are lines whose meaning completely escapes one until the lines are read aloud. For Selby, stress, pitch, juncture and intonation are often more meaningful—as indeed they are in real speech—than words themselves. He must be given credit for having attempted to capture their meaning and even more for having succeeded as well as he has in doing so. As for the words themselves—well, there can be no doubt that *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, to quote the words of another reviewer, will capture the "obscenity sweepstakes for 1964." If your sensitivities are offended at seeing in print those four-letter words which everyone knows and for which there are no substitutes, then don't even glance at the pages of this book. But there is nothing more intrinsic in a man than the language he uses, and to put other words in the mouths of Selby's characters would indeed be an artistic abomination. But there is more involved in this use of words than just art. I do not know Selby's Brooklyn, but even so I have known more than one man for whom "the fuckinest sunset you ever saw" was not an obscenity but the most powerfully expressive reaction to beauty seen and appreciated that he could muster. This is not obscenity but poverty of the mind. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is little concerned with poverty of the body—there is no character in this book who cannot afford what he really wants; it is greatly concerned with poverty of the human spirit.

Marcel Martin

SHOW ME THE GOOD PARTS:

The Reader's Guide to Sex in Literature by Robert George Reisner, N. Y., Citadel Press, 1964, 340 pp., \$5.95.

Made aware, in his job as librarian, that many, if not most readers of fiction in our time are really interested only in the sexy passages of books, Robert George Reisner has set out to

compile a bibliography of those parts and those parts alone.

He has dissected 800 works of fiction, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron* to *The Carpetbaggers* and *Another Country* and has listed their erotic passages carefully under 33 general headings, from "Adultery" to "Homosexuality (Male)" to "Lesbianism" to "Voyeurism," neglecting no interesting variation in between.

There is an informative and amusing introduction to each section. Reisner is a wit as well as a scholar and has made use of some quotations from early writers that would have bemused them, to say the least, viz.: "Mercy to him that shows it, is the rule." William Cowper, *The Task*, Book VI, as a heading for the section on "Exhibitionism." To each section is appended a rich bibliography of non-fiction works dealing with the subject.

In addition, there is a substantial "General Interest Bibliography" of non-fiction works on sex, and there is a most useful pair of indexes, one of authors, one of titles. Naturally there are deficiencies. First, of course, one wonders why 800 books and not 1,800 or 8,000? The answer is doubtless physical: one man can read only so many books even if he selects library copies and investigates only those pages whose edges have been smudged by prurient fingers. Secondly, a book of 340 pages is convenient to handle and, covering only this much territory, printable in a type that, unlike the type in most reference works, is easy to read. Third, half a loaf is better than none.

This was a good book to do. Its frivolous usage is sufficient excuse for its existence, but it can be of serious use to scholars also. Its bibliographical apparatus is efficient. While there might be fewer listings under subject headings where only cross references

to listings of the same book under other subject headings are given, this is a hard thing to avoid in cataloguing sex scenes. Voyeurism and masturbation and a few other varieties of activity are likely to take place almost simultaneously in many such episodes, and the bibliographer must decide which act is central and work from there.

It probably would have been better had Mr. Reisner omitted the short story from consideration. Since he does make mention of "Just Boys" by James T. Farrell, why then leave out "Baby Face"? Since he mentions "The Knife of the Times" by William Carlos Williams, a fine Lesbian story, why does he omit "The Sailor's Son," an equally masterful story of homosexuality (male)?

I have only one other complaint. Since Mr. Reisner's general attitude toward the infinite variety of sexual

expression found in the books he has examined for us is good humored and grown up, I am at a loss to understand his repeated use of the derogatory word "perverted" instead of the scientific and detached "deviant." This is made more absurd by the fact that some 22 of his 33 general subject headings need one or the other word to describe them. Or do they? If deviant expressions of sex so far outnumber "normal" expressions of sex, haven't we got the Orwellian 1984 attitude already with us: War is Peace and Peace is War—Deviant is Normal and Normal is Deviant?

Ah, well. This is a good and useful book. And the fact that it is filled with laughs and has a wonderfully healthy attitude toward the side of life that interests most of us most makes it worth having done, despite its inevitable deficiencies.

James Colton

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