

Halton Hills Outlook

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Their Outlook

Review

Celebrity name-droppers

By BARRIE HAYNE

For two decades, authors E.L. Doctorow and Gore Vidal have been bringing real historical figures into relations with imaginary characters. They've brought into this factual fiction real people such as the Rosenbergs and Stanford White, Aaron Burr and Theodore Roosevelt.

The likes of George Baxt and Stuart Kaminsky have been doing the same thing with a mixed cast of real people... and not so real... such as Alfred Hitchcock and the Algonquin Round Table, the Munchkins and Mae West.

Elliot Roosevelt, following Margaret Truman, actually mingled the reality of his own First Family with a set of fictional sleuths and criminals.

And now, here are two novels rather in the same vein.

One drops celebrity names with the liberal hand of a chef scattering capers in a salad.

The other novel is more restrained. It is written by an actual celebrity, one close to the centre of all power who may, we are enticed into thinking, be writing a "Roman cleft". (Want to guess who's who?)

Nan and Ivon Lyons, who scored such a success 12 years ago with *Someone is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe*, try again with *The President is Coming to Lunch* (Doubleday, 289 pages, \$16.95). This is the celebrity name dropper.

The other, the result of Pierre Salinger's second collaboration with Leonard Gross, is *Mortal Games* (Doubleday, 319 pages, \$17.95).

The first of these belongs squarely in the Doctorow-Kaminsky school, and is marked, even disfigured, by the constant sense that its authors move (and, of course, eat) in the exalted circles they analyze, as we emphatically do not. They archly drop a few crumbs of inside information for the hungry.

The Lyons' novel begins with the central figure, the beautiful ex-show girl, now owner of New York's most exclusive restaurant, surveying her domain of in-grouped tables. She sees, in the space of a few pages, Norman Lear, Audrey Hepburn, Baryshnikov ("I am turning into a luncheon"), Meryl, Chris Reeve, Dustin, Woody and Barbara Walters (who doesn't lip, presumably because that isn't inside information).

TRENDY LEVEL

If this were done satirically or with self-regarding humor, it might be tolerable, but it is all at that sub-Kaminsky, trendy level that confirms S.S. Van Dine's judgment of 60 years ago that banned humor from the detective story.

Not that this is really a detective story: there is no central perspicacious consciousness, one step behind whose deductions we plod, no Watson to assure us by contrast of our own superior intelligence.

The level of writing, however, assures us of that, and the perspicacity is (inadequately) supplied by the CIA agent who is preparing the way for the president's visit to Libby's Restaurant, where you seem to be able to get anything you want, from catfish bisque ("Stallone loves it") to "Red, white and bluefish," to the restauranteuse herself (in the checkroom on top of all those sables).

Libby herself, many years before, has secretly given birth to the president's son, now growing up gay in the restaurant business. After an assassination attempt, the CIA agent and the restauranteuse get together. In the meantime, there are a lot of epigrams, spoken, we assume, as all the beautiful people

really speak them: "What the hell are you so worried about?" "Nothing special. The same thing every one is worried about. Killer bees. The shroud of Turin. Going metric. You know..." "Everyone in L.A. is bisexual. They like men and they like boys."

There are some choice similes. There are even occasional literary allusions: "She was eager to leave it all behind, brokenhearted that her departure would have so much more meaning for him than her presence. Libby understood the sweet sadness of Charles Darnay's final steps. It was a far, far better thing she had done..."

It would perhaps show all too well that we were not members of the in-group to complain that the whole point of that story was that Charles Darnay did not have to mount the scaffold. These literary Lyons are presumably thinking of "Sydney," as Libby might call him if he happened to be tipping in her restaurant.

OLDER GENRE

If the President is Coming to Lunch has affinities with these recent trends of in-group jokiness, *Mortal Games* harks back to the older genre of paranoia fiction, and, wittingly or not, seems to pay tribute to a curiosity of 50 years ago. The President's Mystery Plot, written by a team of S.S. Van Dine, Fuller Oursler, and others, at the prompting of Franklin D. Roosevelt himself.

When this novel was republished in 1967, it carried an introduction by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of Pierre Salinger's co-workers in the Kennedy White House. But, whereas the hero of *The President's Mystery Plot* was fleeing from a mundane existence to one where he could benefit mankind, the hero of *Mortal Games* is the leading American correspondent in Europe, who discovers the Nazi past of the candidate supported by the U.S. government for the French presidency.

He also discovers a group within the CIA that is working against U.S. policy in the service of some higher patriotism - it is a mark of this kind of fiction that its plots are often torn from today's headlines.

The hero is therefore the target of an assassination attempt, along with his young wife. He is secretly saved, and inducted into a new identity, in which he will be able to track down the renegades. At the end of the novel, the hero, unable to resist any longer the young wife who has devoted her widowhood to his memory, resumes his relationship with her in his new identity. The book closes in a way a reviewer should probably not reveal.

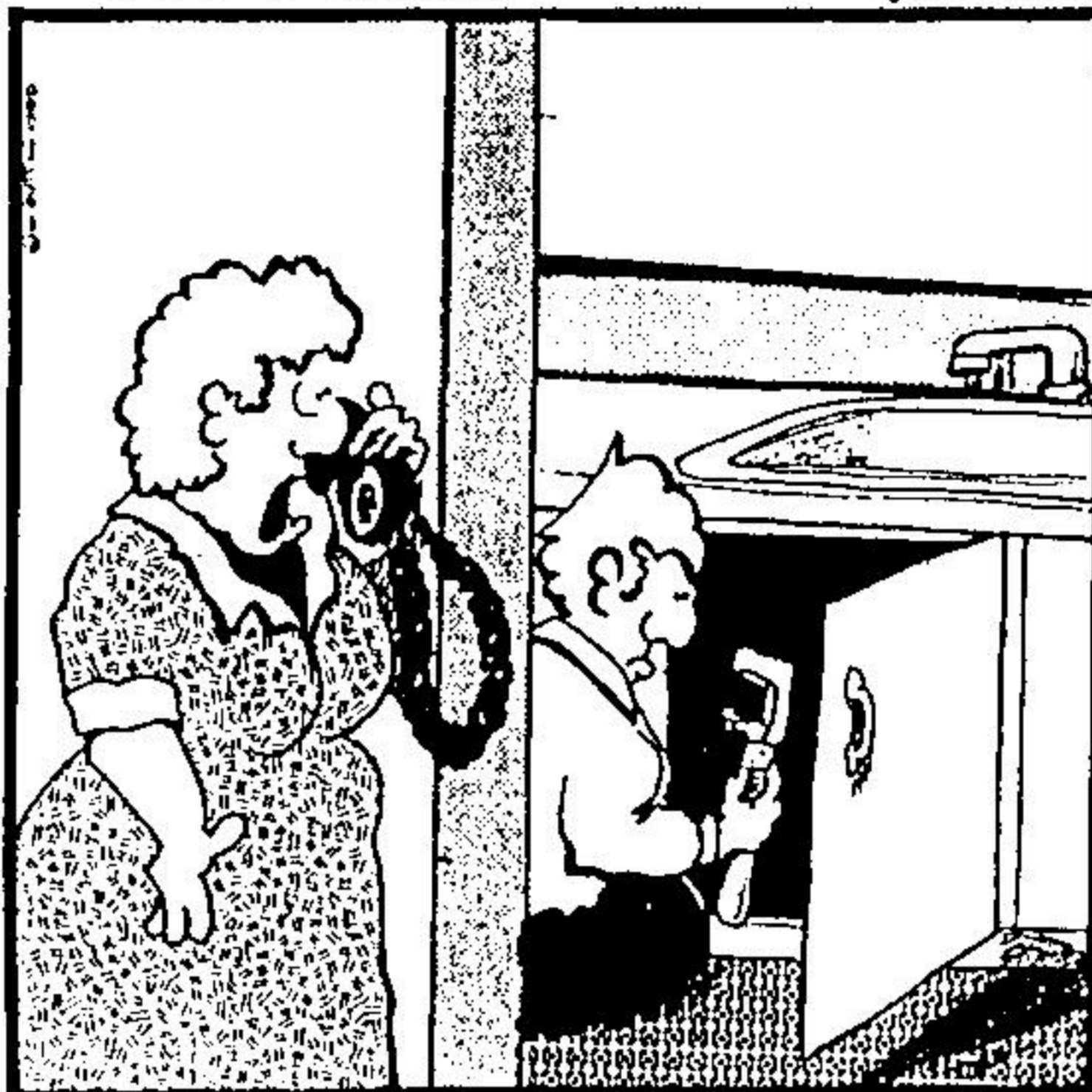
All this may strain the credulity, though E. Phillips Oppenheim did something like it nearly 70 years ago in *The Great Impersonation* - though perhaps in 1988 it is less plausible that a wife should fail to recognize the marital body than it was for Oppenheim!

But Salinger and Gross tell their story with conviction, and they have learned the lesson of the police procedural, that the detailed description of a routine or process can ground in verisimilitude the grossest incredibilities of plot. The most absorbing part of *Mortal Games* is the section in which we have, in great detail, the plastic surgery, the voice retraining and the alteration of the whole style of living of the hero as he prepares for his new identity.

Barrie Hayne teaches English and cinema studies at the University of Toronto. He has written a number of articles on the genre of detective fiction. He is a former vice-president of the Popular Culture Association.

Two's a Crowd

By BILL BUTTLE



"This is an emergency! Send a plumber right away or he'll try doing it himself!"

Go ahead and ask



Ottawa Report

By Stewart MacLeod
Thomson News Service

If Andre Ouellet is such a great choice as co-chairman of the Liberal Party's national campaign organization, why wasn't he chosen long ago by leader John Turner?

Go ahead and ask. Lots of others do.

It was only a few days ago that Mr. Turner dipped into his lightly bonded caucus and selected Mr. Ouellet, a 21-year veteran of Parliament, to join Senator Alasdair Graham in oiling up the party's campaign machinery.

And the leader, digging deep for enthusiasm, declared that "we're ready and we're on a war footing." If an election writ were issued tomorrow, he went on, "we would be ready."

Well, that's not the way all Liberals see it, but then Mr. Turner does have a unique responsibility to psyche his troops for battle. Whether the appointment of Mr. Ouellet will do much to enhance Liberal battle readiness is open to speculation.

When he said himself that his job would be that of a "healer," Mr. Ouellet was displaying his own unique ability in the art of understatement.

It isn't easy for practising Quebec politicians to get a firm grip on what's happening to federal liberalism in the province. It's doubly difficult for journalists who generally ply their trade outside Quebec's borders.

But the appointment of Mr. Ouellet, in a role that's vital for the party in Quebec, would seem to be at best, a calculated compromise. The big question is, was it well calculated?

LITTLE CHOICE

In fairness to the troubled Mr. Turner - and if we can borrow one of his own terms - he didn't have too many options after he was forced to fire Senator Pietro Rizzuto, the previous co-chairman. Senator Rizzuto was instrumental in organizing

that latest unsuccessful coup against the leader.

That was when 22 of Mr. Turner's 38-member caucus signed letters suggesting he should quit.

After that little failed uprising was splashed across the front pages of every newspaper in the country, Mr. Turner could lose little time in bringing in a new co-chairman, whose sole responsibility is Quebec. At this crucial time, such vital posts can't be left empty too long, especially when the party is wrestling with national debts of more than \$6 billion.

And when there are only 17 MPs from Quebec, many of them known signatories to those "Dear John" letters, the field of choice was obviously narrow.

One suspects there was even some anguish over Mr. Ouellet's appointment, since more than one Quebec MP is ready to swear, privately at least, that the new co-chairman was in favor of Mr. Turner's departure.

However, he did not put anything in writing.

WON'T SAY

And, when it comes to commenting on his stand during the latest palace revolt, Mr. Ouellet seems to choose his words with extreme caution. He flatly declares he was "not part of the operation" to have Mr. Turner go.

"I had a personal conversation and this is personal between him and me," says the former Trudeau cabinet minister. "The reason I am in this position is that Mr. Turner trusts me and wants me to help him."

Mr. Ouellet did help Mr. Turner during the 1984 leadership campaign. But his success made him some powerful political enemies in Quebec where, many felt, he should have been supporting Jean Chretien's leadership bid.

There is no doubt that a deep rift still exists between these two groups. For that matter, there are still rifts in the caucus between the pro-Turner and anti-Turner forces.

When Outremont MP Lucie Pepin was asked by a reporter why Mr. Ouellet would privately favor Mr. Turner's departure but not sign a letter to that effect, she was quoted as saying, "he always wants to be on the good side."

You can tell it's not all sweetness and light.

Rock 'n roll ruminations



Staff Comment

By BRIAN MACLEOD

Where has all the music gone? Rock 'n roll that is.

Barrelling down Highway 7 on my way into work on Thursday morning I couldn't help but wonder what kids these days would think of real rock 'n roll music. The impetus was some insipid song on the radio by what used to be a good rock band. Foreigner's "I want to know what love is" is a smash hit but their song is indicative of what's happened to music in the 80s.

When Elvis made his big comeback with *Hunk of Burning Love* and *Suspicious Minds* some said he'd forgotten how to rock. Hindsight proved that wasn't true.

Unfortunately that same claim - about forgetting how to rock - can apply to a good spectrum of 80s bands.

What I want to know is, "Who took the rock out of rock 'n roll?"

Back in the late 70s - disco notwithstanding - those "bad" rock 'n roll bands knew how to put meaning and feeling into their music.

Don't get me wrong. *The Heart of Rock 'n Roll* is still beating - it's just fainter.

The "Me" decade showed its stuff in music.

Hot Blooded Foreigner had *Double Vision* long before they wanted to know what love is.

Elton John thought Saturday Night was alright for fightin' ten years before Michael Jackson Beat it.

And who knows what Boy George was watching when the Cars were watching their best friend's girlfriend.

Meatloaf found *Paradise* by the Dashboard Light. *Loverboy* almost found it years later.

Bruce Springsteen was Born to Run before he even considered the meaning of being Born in the U.S.A.

Styx had a *Grand Illusion* before Whitney Houston wanted to Dance With Somebody.

Boston had *More than A Feeling* about Amanda.

You could even spend a Day at the Races or a Night at the Opera and still get rocked off your seat.

And we "children of the 70s" watch in dismay as Kim Mitchell - bless his heart - forgot about his buddy Max Webster and started singing about some Irish girl named Patty O'Lantern.

The pressure on bands these days is to become "poppish" like *Honey-moon Suite*.

The effects can even be seen on perennials like David Bowie, who went through Changes before he said *Let's Dance*.

And Paul McCartney's Band is definitely on the Run.

Defenders of the faith might say, "But isn't Bon Jovi the first heavy metal band to strike a number one hit?"

Heavy metal? They do know how to rock but even they just borrowed the instruments and styles of 70s rockers and "poppitized" it.

But still the kids today keep bop-pin' on.

And who carries the flag for rock these days?

Call him commercial and even more eighth than the eighties, but Billy Idol knows how to do it.