

smells there are, how gorgeous is the
distant
sound of dogs, and engines—Blessed art
Thou,
Lord of the falling leaf, Lord of the
rhubarb,
Lord of the roving cat, Lord of the cloud.

Blessed art Thou oh grapefruit King of
the universe,
Blessed art Thou my sink, oh Blessed art
Thou
Thou milkweed Queen of the sky, burster
of seeds,
Who bringeth forth juice from the earth. ■

Crazy in Jerusalem

TODD GITLIN

DAMASCUS GATE. By Robert Stone. Houghton Mifflin. 500 pp. \$26.

It would be much too simple to say that a lot of Robert Stone's characters are stoned. Drugs are only their turnstiles. They get stoned, also, on going places they don't belong but can't stay away from. In six novels now, one of the major

oeuvres in American letters of the past three decades, Stone is obsessed with the spiritual desperadoes, the overreachers, the uneasy riders, those who are tempted to go too far out—to madness, riches, prizes, revolution, whatever they find out too late they can't get. These zealots are seekers at the end of their dope, stoned on freedom, jumping at chances to squander everything dear in exchange for something ineffable, searching for some transcendence that will leave unbelievers sprawling in the dust. The resulting tragedies take place in a Stone Country consisting exclusively of edges—New Orleans, Vietnam, California, Central America, Mexico's West Coast, the open Atlantic. All but the last (from *Outerbridge Reach*) are furiously hot places, Boschian infernos where only outsiders dwell, and then only on the sufferance of the demons who diddle and drive them. The guilty and the innocent are lashed together, having been parachuted into a moral wilderness, left to deal obscurely in blasted landscapes under skies so big and empty they drive the weak to kill. It is as if Graham Greene were on street drugs, graced with a lyrical gift and a genius for dry anticlimax all at once. Stone is an ecstatic of disillusion.

There are inescapable whiffs of Conrad, too, where the goers-for-broke collide with the hangers-back, the once-tempted who are now (they hope) resistant to falling. But in Stone, when a Marlow watches aghast (and rapt) as a Kurtz slips over the edge, it

has been a very long time since Marlow thought he was innocent. Zealots who have forgotten how to doubt know how to sink their claws into doubters who are not immune to zeal. The doubters are searching also, but for something they half-suspect they would not even recognize if it fell on them in the street. The doubters are half in love with easeless apocalypse. But for the grace of God, they would be seekers themselves. Indeed, they are often ex-seekers. Now they are wry devotees of ambiguity. The ex-, in Stone, are always asking Why.

In *Damascus Gate*, Stone's principal doubter is a jaded journalist, Christopher Lucas, author of a book on the U.S. invasion of Grenada, "an American and hence the slave of possibility." Lucas, half-Jewish, half- (and ex-) Catholic, all Stone, was a religion major (wonderful touch!), and though it is his custom to stand "off to one side," he is prone to feeling "pursued by unreasonable yearnings." When the book begins, he's procrastinating on a Condé Nast travel piece, hoping instead to line up more demanding work, something that would expose "depravity and duplicity on both sides of supposedly uncompromising sacred struggles. He found such stories reassuring, an affirmation of the universal human spirit. Lucas desperately preferred almost anything to blood and soil, ancient loyalty, timeless creeds." Enter Sonia Barnes, red-diaper baby, half-African-American, half-Jew, ex-Communist, ex-Quaker activist, ex-resident in Cuba, now a Sufi and a jazz singer. ("Something cool," is the first lyric Lucas hears her sing. "I'd like to order something cool.") Like Lucas, but from the other side, Sonia "required

the proximity of faith." They are bound to fall for each other, though violins do not play. Lucas's opposite number is Janusz Zimmer, Polish journalist, also an ex-Communist, working the Gaza Strip beat. Zimmer had also been a visitor to Grenada, "just before" and "soon after" the invasion. Zimmer is so dry he could draw water out of the Negev. At one point Lucas observes that Zimmer "was being contemptuous, but could not be sure." Enter also Nuala Rice, an Irishwoman with strong Palestinian sympathies whose International Children's Foundation, working in Gaza, has also engaged Sonia's labors.

Lucas determines to collaborate on a book about people who suffer, and exult, from the Jerusalem Syndrome, the belief (once they set foot in the Holy Land) that they are authentic prophets or messiahs reborn. ("So you're another guy after religious nuts?" Sonia asks him. "That's *old*, man." "I'm not a put-down artist," Lucas assures her, "and I don't go for the obvious.") Lucas's partner in writing is Dr. Pinchas Obermann, a shrink specializing in zealots, including, once, Willie Ludlum, based on the real-life Australian shepherd who torched the Al Aksa mosque in the belief that Jesus would come back faster if the former Mount Moriah were religiously cleansed of Islamic shrines. Such fancies persist, extremity of vision being the commonplace of the Jerusalem Syndrome project. One place that will attract Lucas's attention is the fundamentalist House of the Galilean, where millennial Christian fantasies dovetail with terrorist designs. He will intersect with Raziel Melker, son of a Congressman, musician, ex-yeshiva student, ex-Jew for Jesus, ex-Zen monk, an off-again-on-again junkie turned cabalist who "always wanted more. To be apostate and messiah and Minus too." Raziel, whose well-placed parents have sent him to Jerusalem to chill out, has attached himself to Adam De Kuff, an elderly, maladroit Christian convert whom he meets in the waiting room of their common shrink, Dr. Obermann. De Kuff, bipolar, given to long silences, is a reluctant messiah, but becomes convinced he is the real thing, bringing the news that all the false messiahs were distractions and that he is destined to lead. By the nose is how some of his followers lead him.

In Jerusalem, loose people converge like misshapen iron filings drawn to the same magnet, as at a reggae bar full of "Viking quasi-maidens, Ethiopians with Malcolm X hats, Romanian pickpockets and American Juniors Abroad in kibbutznik hats. Each boogied according to his covenant." Stone's Jerusalem is home to the deranged and to

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"competing moralizers," where the zealots are drunk on portents, and so of course they migrate to the Place of Places, where the sky is a "rich, indifferent blue, the first and holiest of unresponding skies," "every sultry breeze [is] infested with prayer" and "every crossroads labor[s] under its own curse." Messianic promises are even more common than apostasy. Even a group of Japanese pilgrims reminds Lucas of Nagasaki, once "the most Christian of Japan's cities," where "all through the war, the Japanese had thought the Americans spared it air raids for that reason." The very stones seem ready to rapture into the heavens, and crazies migrate to stare wild-eyed into the butt-end of history, or explode somebody else's Holy of Holies to bring on the end-time:

Each year, it seemed, the equinoctial moon inspired stranger and stranger doings, usually vaguely Pentecostal in spirit, the spontaneous outpourings of many lands. Once, to be a Protestant had meant to be a decent Yankee schoolmarm or kindly clerical milord. No longer. There had commenced a regular Easter Parade, replete with odd headgear. Anglophone crazies bearing monster sandwich boards screeched empty-eyed into megaphones. Entire platoons of costumed Latin Cristos, dripping blood both real and simulated, appeared on the Via Dolorosa, while their wives and girlfriends sang in tongues or went into convulsions.

Even in the more secular Tel Aviv, conspiracies abound. The very cafes are thick with them. In the midst of the general *mishegoss*, the crazies have as many reasons as they have covenants. A minor-league gambler (a card-counter at blackjack) turns out to be a numerologist obsessed with variations on the number 36, and casts a spell "which he had had frequent occasions to use against various officials and auditors in the Southern District of New York." One fanatic sect-founder is a Jewish junior-college political science professor and football coach "who had grown up in an anti-Semitic New England town and lived a secular life.... He had come to the Apocalypse through his readings of Scripture, the agrarian pessimism of Wendell Berry and the predestinarian poetry of Larry Woiwode. The history of Israel, he felt, provided evidence of divine election and the human depravity from which only God's choice could rescue humankind." He is, one rightly suspects, destined to play a role in the plot more

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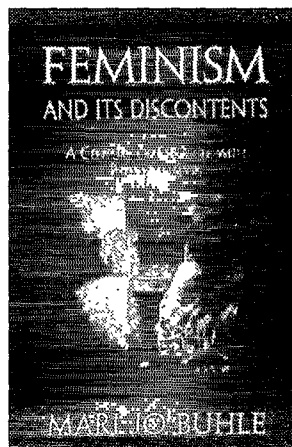
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comic than tragic, though barely.

If the tangle of Stone's major characters sounds intricate, it is, and then some. This is Stone's longest novel, and it is overlong and overstuffed, the action often oddly slack. Shake the likes of his whole sick crew and bake them in the Middle East oven, send them on criminal missions into the Gaza Strip, expose them to angry Palestinians and millenarian settlers, and *Damascus Gate* ought to be superb. It has Stone's characteristic lizard eye for human tension and pretension. It has the morally pained point of view, than which nothing could be more apposite for Israel and Palestine. But the intricacy comes at a steep price. Stone's largest population of characters is too dense, too much a cobbler of bad apples. The plots are so thickly knitted together with counterplots, the intelligence agents with counterintelligence, it gets hard to keep them alive in the mind. As character after character maneuvers, masks slip away and reversals come too frequently. Perhaps because there is so much plotting—in both senses—at work, the mild acid of Stone's prose is at times weaker than usual. Forward motion stalls. Stone's characteristic grace

notes are here, but muted, perhaps in the interest of motion that proves difficult to sustain. For all the quasi-biblical raptures, lightning does not strike. There is nothing nearly as vivid as the desperate snowy zonk-out of *Outerbridge Reach*, comparable in its intensity to the transports of Hans Castorp in the great "Snow" chapter of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Here, Stone's passionate intensities clog up.

Still, Stone's fascination with moral collisions and pirouettes shines through *Damascus Gate*, and the rewards, sentence by sentence, are frequent. His newfound Balzacian relish for multifarious character extends this time even to women. Most gratifying, more strongly than in previous novels, there's a comic aspect that gets as close to redemption as Stone will allow. As demented Jewish settlers and Palestinian villagers "entertain each other," so do Stone's crazies. In *Damascus Gate*, Stone Country has the unexpected virtue of finding in Israel/Palestine the shtick each party sorely needs. All seekers of Revelation and *jihad* will be equally offended—no small tribute. ■

The first third of the novel takes place during the summer of 1958. Ted (a predatory womanizer even before the accident) wants a divorce. But he also wants custody of Ruth—one of his few redeeming traits is that he gives her the affection her mother can't—but the double standard of the fifties dictates that mothers always get custody unless they commit adultery. Ted calculates that his ice-queen wife might be sexually vulnerable to any young man who resembles the dead boys, so he hires 16-year-old Eddie O'Hare as his summer assistant.

Eddie and Marion's affair is a wonderful evocation of teenage horniness, solo sex and the hangdog purity of first love. But there's an undertow of creepiness, especially where Ruth is concerned. In the first scene of the novel, she is awakened by the sounds of Eddie and Marion making love.

When Ruth Cole entered her parents' bedroom, she saw the naked young man who had mounted her mother from behind; he was holding her mother's breasts in his hands and humping her on all fours, like a dog, but it was neither the violence nor the repugnance of the sexual act that made Ruth scream.... It was the young man himself who made Ruth scream, because she was certain he was one of her dead brothers; he looked so much like Thomas...that Ruth Cole believed she had seen a ghost.

Ultimately Eddie helps Marion escape without him (but with the photographs) to start a new life. The summer remains the high point of Eddie's life. He will forever afterward be hung up on Marion in particular and older women in general. "I try to see the whole woman," he explains. "I try to see her whole life in her. There's something so moving about someone's whole life." A widow is not expected to mourn for more than one year, but a truly grand grief—like Marion's for her sons and Eddie's for Marion—consumes a lifetime. Eddie and Marion carry the torch to the point that they're burned by it. As for Ruth, her secondhand childhood at least proves to have a silver lining. "That Thomas and Timothy were killed before she was born was another part of the reason Ruth Cole became a writer; from her earliest memory, she was forced to imagine them." Not surprisingly, she also grows up to be a control freak.

Like Eddie, John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942—a fact that would ordinarily go unremarked in a review of a work of fiction. But *A Widow for One Year* is at least as much about the relation-

Yupward Mobility

LINDSY VAN GELDER

A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR. By John Irving. Random House. 537 pp. \$27.95.

John Irving is arguably the American Balzac, or perhaps our Dickens—a rip-roaring storyteller whose intricate plot machinery is propelled by good old-fashioned greed, foolishness and passion. His characters are sometimes as much a collection of tics as believable people, but they're nothing if not memorable: a cavalcade of lovable misfits, fruitcake feminists, transvestite hookers, wrestlers, dwarfs, tamers of bears and losers of body parts. More than most big-tent writers, however, Irving wants us to care about the smallest aches of the human heart. His books are full of people with obsessions, and even the ridiculous ones have a kind of integrity. *A Widow for One Year* won't disappoint Irvingites who count on this mix. But Irving has also given us a pair of (possibly masturbating) Escher hands: a book about the obsessional, colorful characters whose pain and yearnings turn into books about same.

At the onset of the novel, Ted and Mar-

ion Cole's marriage is running on empty. The deaths of their sons in a grisly accident have devastated the beautiful Marion. The Coles have had sex only once since the accident, a "well-intentioned but passionless act" to conceive a daughter, Ruth, as a replacement for the boys. Marion wasn't counting on a daughter. In any case, she can't bring herself to love Ruth and possibly lose her, too. The walls of the Coles' Hamptons house are a photographic shrine to Timothy and Thomas. Ruth knows the story of each picture the way other 4-year-olds know Dr. Seuss: "This is the one with Thomas in the tall hat... Timothy is trying to reach Thomas's hat, but he can't reach it because Thomas is standing on a ball." Sometimes the little girl can be soothed only by making the rounds of the photo gallery, like Stations of the Cross.

Lindsay Van Gelder, who writes for Allure, is co-author of *The Girls Next Door: Into the Heart of Lesbian America* (Simon & Schuster).

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