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Courier-Journal

Balancing the Books

Who's Fooling Whom?

By Father John S. Kennedy

What can that possibly mean? Such is one's thought on seeing the title of Tom Wolfe's new book - "Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux \$5.95). The "Chic" is, of course, readily intelligible. But the rest?

Well, Radical Chic, according to Mr. Wolfe is Jet Set society's giddy and glancing involvement with radical movements such as the Black Panthers. And the first section of the book, so styled, deals principally with the famous party given early in 1970 by Leonard Bernstein and his wife in their New York apartment at which members of the Jet Set met members of the Panthers. The purpose was to raise bail money.

As for Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers, the translation is somewhat as follows. Flak Catcher is Mr. Wolfe's term for the man in any poverty agency who is assigned to listen to complaints and, apparently, but not actually, satisfactorily answer them. And mau-mauing is the performance by which militant complainants terrorize a flak catcher. The piece on the Bernstein party and its aftermath deflates, if it does not discredit, Radical Chic. The celebrities, real or fake, are not genuinely committed to the radical causes with which they make brief, gingerly contact. They see in the causes a means of getting a vicarious thrill and also some publicity.

There is something reprehensible in faddishly taking up the Black Panthers much as these same people previously took up "rock music, the twist, frug genre dances, Pop Art, Camp, the courting of pet primitives such as the Rolling Stones and Jose Torres." All these were more or less trivial. The Panthers are something else again.

To line oneself up with them in all seriousness and in full realization of what the consequences may be, is an explicable, if dangerous, course of action. But to attempt to use the Panthers for one's own silly, ephemeral purposes, is like playing with dynamite, an idiotic business indeed.

Paul Horgan's "Whitewater" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux \$6.95) will have more readers, and will bring the author more money, than any of his previous works. But it is not the best of his novels.

Its virtues are its almost magical evocation of a vanished scene and a time, and its intensely romantic atmosphere. Its defects are its use of largely stock characters and its clanking succession of stock situations.

Set in the late 1940s, its locale is the Texas town of Belvedere. This is Plains country, and Horgan pictures it vividly, in one or another season, under dust storm or by moonlight. The description is so loving and so lyrical that one is almost rendered insensible to the deficiencies of the narrative.

Three high school students are the main figures. One is Billy Breedlove, a senior, handsome, energetic, a leader. The second is Phillipson Durham, his classmate, more sensitive,

intellectual, and introspective. The third is lovely Marilee Underwood, a year younger than the boys, deeply in love with Billy, but caring for Phillipson, too. The three are virtually inseparable.

Many other characters enter the action but the emphasis is on the three teenagers.

Horgan long ago established a notable reputation for writing which has subtlety, pungency, and sheen. That reputation is not in the least compromised by the present work. His keen discernment of feelings, and his ability to convey them, are also impressively in evidence here. Particularly true is his nostalgic evocation of youthful moods.

Edmund Fuller is no Ernest Hemingway. He has none of the intensity or brilliance of Hemingway at the top of his form. But he does perceive and take into account aspects of the human being and the human situation, along with virtues and values, to which Hemingway was apparently blind.

Fuller's latest novel, "Flight" (Random House, \$5.95), focuses on a man and his 19-year-old nephew. The man is Samuel Tilden, 55, who teaches in a boys' preparatory school, where his nephew, Greg Warren, is a senior.

Tilden is a widower. His youngest son, Sam, has been killed in Vietnam. His two other children are married and live at some distance. Greg's mother has had three husbands. He is the son of the first. He has been thoughtlessly tossed about and neglected.

He is in trouble at school because of using pot. Suddenly he takes off for Europe. Tilden, who has some appreciation of the boy's anger and anguish, goes in search of him, in Rome, in Florence, and successfully in Venice.

Mr. Fuller's story is more than adequate. His characters are credible, and his compositions of place are evocative. But most impressive is his exploration of the generation gap, the drug mystique, the whole attitude of dropping out. In an unobtrusive way, he cites a factor in human life which is generally ignored - the grace of God.

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