

remains an elusive problem for Muslim states.

This lesson was, and even today largely is, misunderstood in Middle Eastern societies. Will oil turn out to have been a mere reprieve from the predicaments of development? Do the

traditions of Islam need to be modified? Are there political leaders brave enough to face the undoubted challenge of self-appraisal? These questions continue to haunt the region's inhabitants, as they have for centuries. □

STRANGER AND BROTHER:
A PORTRAIT OF C.P. SNOW
Philip Snow/Scribner's/\$14.95

Thomas Mallon

C.P. Snow has been dead for over three years now. Even people who never read a word he wrote can recall a couple of things about him, like the photographs of his bald and bespectacled head—something less and less anthropomorphic as the years went on—and the fact that he made the phrase “The Two Cultures” a popular label for the troubling (if obvious) estrangement of the arts and sciences. He knew that his own varied experiences would make him an intriguing speaker on such an idea, and while he no doubt cared about the notion itself, it probably also appealed to him as a good career move: cornering a bit of the intellectual market, one might say. When he became Baron Snow in 1964 he put a telescope crossed with a pen on his coat of arms, as if registering his trademark.

This account of Snow's varied career by his younger brother Philip does not purport to be definitive, and in fact dithers rather charmingly between the realms of memoir and biography. Nonetheless, in spite of its slightness—and its reverence—a useful picture of Snow's life becomes discernible in it. Charles Percy Snow was born in Leicester in 1905. His father was a shy man, a clerk who in the evenings taught music, his mother a proud woman of conservative leanings. Philip Snow concedes that the family was “always in danger of crashing through the slim frontier into the lowest economic level of the working class,” but he also admits that in later years his brother indulged in a bit of Mr. Bounderby about the family origins: “Because his early struggles were hard, Charles wanted no one to overlook them and, perhaps because of this, he placed the family background just a shade lower in the social scale than it actually was.”

There is no doubt he worked hard. In fact, he worked himself sick before

he got to Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1928. But once there he was certain of success—one way or another. He started out in Physical Chemistry, but even as he did his own research he was absorbed by the spectacle of scientific and academic politics in a literary way. It didn't take him long to decide that writing was to be his main business. Science would provide the basis for his first serious novel (*The Search*, 1934), and university intrigue the material for his most famous (*The Masters*, 1951). He “enjoyed everything” about Cambridge, according to Philip, who became an undergraduate at the college where his brother was a Fellow. C.P. Snow remained there through the early part of the Second World War, until he went to work for the government recruiting scientists to work on the development of radar. As his career as a novelist gained momentum he also did a stint in British industry (part time at English Electric). He would eventually, in the mid-sixties, become Parliamentary Secretary in the new Ministry of Technology set up in the first Wilson government. (Britain is still decrepitly awaiting, twenty years later, the promised high-tech transformation of her economy.) Snow, because of the “Two Cultures” and his public activities, gradually became recognized as a kind of cultural seer, occasionally laughed at by highbrows, but often attended to by middlebrows—among whom, in any case, the action lies.

Despite his belief in the critical importance of luck, Snow knew that his varied successes had been much the result of shrewd deliberateness, the methodical ambition his brother quite clearly admires. Snow almost never missed a trick that lay between himself and the main chance. In 1939 he was putting a bit of money aside in the U.S., in case the going got too tough in a defeated Britain. When a few years before he advised Philip not to join the Communist Party it was less on ideo-

logical grounds than professional ones: “If I joined it would be very difficult to find a job on leaving Cambridge—or at least one's choice would be highly circumscribed.” (Philip provides, in fact, an amusing illustration of how Communism brushed the most unlikely temperaments at Cambridge during the 1930s: He would find his real work when he joined the Colonial Service and was posted to the South Seas. While there he wrote a book about cricket in Fiji. When he got home he became, for a quarter century, the Bursar at Rugby.)

Snow liked making money and was uncontrollably eager to know people's salaries as soon as he met them. He

sent his son to Eton during his time in the Labour government, and he clearly relished all the honorary degrees and testimonials that came to him in his last two decades. Philip is driven to a rapt inclusiveness when it comes to naming them: “The highest Bulgarian cultural honour had been awarded to him—the International Dimitrov Prize. . . .” (The Nobel eluded him.) He protested that he was not so captivated by winning as people made out: “I'm often accused of being entirely interested in success. Anyone who reads my books will realise that what I'm most closely in sympathy with is tragic failure.” This strikes one as being true if one considers how many sad

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souls walk through the *Strangers and Brothers* novels; but the reason Snow found failure so absorbingly tragic in others was that he found it so out of the question for himself. In fact, he liked people who had started out and ended up more or less as he had: "To have been poor and to have succeeded in an intellectual rather than a commercial sense went a long way towards earning his approval." And if you could add commercial success to that, well, so much the better.

Even the greatest enterprise of his life, the eleven novels in the *Strangers and Brothers* series, seems to have impressed him less as an imaginative challenge than a career opportunity. He told Philip in 1935: "I think I've a really workable idea that's going to occupy me for the next ten or twenty years. I'm rather excited by it and, given some sanity in the world to enable me to carry it through, I believe it'll make me." He closely followed the books' sales, because, as he put it in 1947, "no front rank novelists (except Proust & Henry James) failed to get a reasonable sale in their own life-time." One of the transcendent moments in his career seems to have been a telephone call, in 1959, telling him that *The Affair* had been made a Book of the Month Club choice in the United States.

It should be remembered, though, in spite of Snow's rather industrial approach to his own fiction, that the *Strangers and Brothers* series was sustained by some noble intentions and very good moments. Conscious of himself as a realist set upon reversing the experimental tides of modernism (a crusade he also conducted in his criticism), Snow wanted to prove the vitality of the chronicle novel in an age whose most famous work of fiction took place in a single day. Describing his goals for the series in 1945, he wrote:

The work has two explicit intentions—first to carry out an investigation into human nature . . . through a wide variety of

COMING NEXT MONTH

Joseph A. Califano, Jr.
on
Irving Kristol

characters, major and minor, second, to depict a number of social backgrounds in England in the period 1920-1950 from the dispossessed to Cabinet Ministers. For each major character, the narrator is occupied with the questions: How much of his fate is due to the accident of his class and time? and how much to the essence of his nature which is unaffected by class and time?

This, of course, sounds more on the order of the nineteenth-century novel than the twentieth. And, in fact, that is what Snow intended: a huge, majestic narrative that would teach people about how the world actually lives its life, instead of flash before them what passes for reality as it streams through a few individual consciousnesses. It was a grandly reactionary task, and it is too bad he wasn't more deft at it. Snow was a notoriously flat writer. He knew how to give his sentences sense, but he almost never made them sing.

There are portions of *Strangers and Brothers* that are entirely involving: the manipulations of *The Masters*; the religious despair of Roy Calvert in *The Light and the Dark*; Lewis Eliot's anguish over his mad wife in *Homecomings*. Snow has wrongly been fixed as a writer whose gifts lay entirely in the description of committee deliberations instead of romantic passions. There are, in fact, in his books some remarkable statements (nineteenth-century novels were permitted to have statements) about love:

There was a lot of chance, I knew, in human relations; one cannot have seen much unless one believed in chance; I might have been luckier and got into a relation less extreme; but on the whole, I had to say of myself what I should have said of others—in your deepest relations, there is only one test of what you profoundly want: it consists of what happens to you.

Unfortunately, this shelf of books tends to sag with its own stylistic weight. There is something more elephantine than integral about it, and judged wholly and finally the undertaking is probably a failure. It is, however, sad that the most memorable attack on Snow's work was F.R. Leavis's sadistic one ("Snow's relation to the age . . . is characterized not by insight and spiritual energy, but by blindness, unconsciousness and automatism"), since Leavis was himself a horribly graceless writer of prose.

Philip Snow's own style is amusingly like his brother's. "The audience was a galaxy of literary and miscellaneous notoriety" is the sort of sentence he's capable of writing. There is a lot of clubbable fat on the clauses; he sometimes sounds a little like a toastmaster or the composer of, well, honorary-degree citations: "A close

friend and as a confidant for nearly fifty years, he was unmistakably influential in keeping Charles informed, encouraged and entertained with a vivacity which the passing years have only faintly sapped." He can describe someone as the "most dolichocephalic of men," a phrase his brother might have chosen, and the chapter titles—exactly like his mentor's—have a cheapo grandeur that makes one grind one's teeth: "Two Men Rebuild Their Hopes," "Stateliness of a Man Presiding," etc. The uncertain form of the book, part biography, part reminiscence, results in a kind of confused charm. I like learning that Lord Snow liked Benny Hill and the Muppets, and I enjoyed the description of the piggishness with which he read the

papers at breakfast; but I didn't care as much about his Ping-Pong matches with Philip as, not unexpectedly, Philip does. The list of match-ups between *Strangers and Brothers* characters and their real-life models has considerable interest.

The point of the book is to make Snow out to be something of a polymath. Certainly he saw more worlds than most men do. But as time goes on he will be remembered for being a novelist and very little else. He took some good material into well-intentioned but clumsy hands, and he was a sturdy soldier in the battle for sense on the modern novel's much abused pages. Alas, he now interests us chiefly for what he attempted than for how he actually managed it. □

DOUBLE CROSSING Erika Holzer/Putnam/\$13.95

John R. Dunlap

Erika Holzer's first novel is very good—superior by first-novel standards. She has something important to say, and she says it in the mode of the serious thriller. The material is carefully researched, the plotting intricate and taut, the dialogue neat and pointed, and most of the narrative smooth enough to be unobtrusive, although it gets a tad bumpy in spots. ("Uniformed maids began passing trays of drinks. Butlers hovered about with bottles poised.") These exceptions aside, the language is nicely crafted, and the title is an apt play on words. *Double Crossing* is about human treachery, dual identity, and the crossing of a bridge called Glienicker, which joins West Berlin to Potsdam, East Germany, over the Havel River. The treachery is pervasive in this novel, but one seedy incident in particular dwells in the memory of Dr. Kurt Brenner, a world-renowned American surgeon on his way to a medical conference in East Berlin.

In a lengthy flashback, Brenner recalls his brief service time in Germany at the end of World War II. At age 19 back in 1945, when the war was safely winding down, "Honor Student" Brenner had enlisted in the Medical Corps so that his experience would give him "an edge over his

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classmates" when he returned to an early registration in medical school. But in Germany, shortly after V-E day and after many experiences too gamy for his taste, Pfc. Brenner is all too eager to get back home—eager enough to strike a deal with a Soviet officer in Berlin: the betrayal of a group of GI-sponsored Ukrainian refugee children in exchange for a complicated arrangement that will net Brenner a quicker passage home. Seven of the ten refugee children leap to their deaths in the Havel River to escape repatriation in the Soviet Union. Brenner, in a moment of panic and in the presence of the Soviet officer, kills an enraged GI who discovered the betrayal.

So Dr. Kurt Brenner—now famous, fiftyish, and on his way from New York to a prestigious confab in East Berlin—has a lot on his mind. The Soviet military officer, Nikolai Malik, had helped Brenner cover up the killing, had blackmailed Brenner for several years afterwards, and then had disappeared. But years later now, the invitation to East Berlin has come to Brenner over the signature of, among others, a Russian official named N. Malik. Well, that's a common enough Russian name, but Dr. Brenner—full of himself and his ambition to be the "apolitical ambassador of good will" at an important Eastern-bloc medical conference—has something to think about on the plane to Berlin.