

EDITORIALS



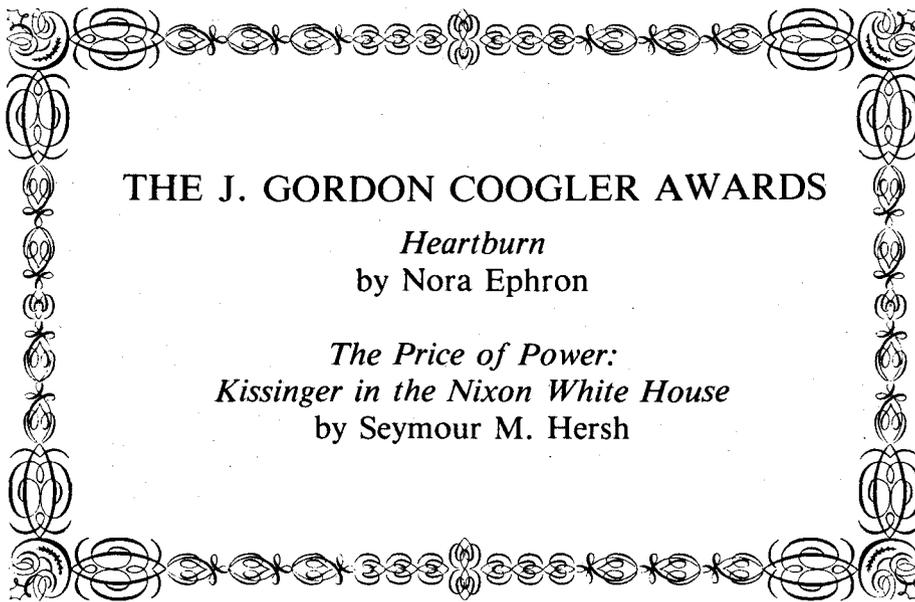
WORST BOOKS OF THE YEAR

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

As years go, 1983 is now a ghost, which means that it is again my privilege to announce the J. Gordon Coogler Awards given annually by *The American Spectator* in recognition of the year's worst books of fiction and nonfiction. Let it be stated before the celebrations begin that in 1983 there probably were worse books published than those we are about to honor. Yet the immortal J. Gordon Coogler in whose memory our awards are made was probably never the worst poet in America, not even at his most absurd. Rather he was the worst of the Republic's celebrated poets. He was in fact so bad that the Republic's wags celebrated him for just that, and he never caught on.

Our Coogler laureates are, then, the authors of celebrated books deemed by our distinguished panel of critics to be least worthy of celebration. These books are donkeys that have strayed in

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THE J. GORDON COOGLER AWARDS

Heartburn
by Nora Ephron

*The Price of Power:
Kissinger in the Nixon White House*
by Seymour M. Hersh

with the show horses, and if other judges have failed to note their pathetic condition here is but another manifestation of the hard times into which American letters have fallen since the great days of Coogler. This year *The American Spectator* is presenting its ninth annual J. Gordon Coogler Awards to Nora Ephron for her novel *Heartburn*,¹ and to Seymour M. Hersh for his scholarly study, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*.² As the latter book has been widely adjudged a piece of fiction and as Ephron's novel is so obviously based on her own life, our laureates might want to exchange awards. Certainly there will be no objection from me. In these books both authors exhibit such a formidable capacity for rage that I am not about to raise their hackles.

Hersh might uncover evidence of my involvement in some nefarious plot against progress, say complicity in the doom of the sainted Salvador Allende, or he might expose one of my tragic flaws after sifting through the contents of my garbage cans. More horrible still, Ephron might renounce her vow against trans-New York males and mark me down as her next target for marriage. Neither of these fierce

¹Alfred A. Knopf, \$11.95.
²Summit Books, \$19.95.

guardians of truth is to be trifled with.

Ephron's very bad book was inspired by the infidelities of her second husband. Hersh's was inspired by infidelities committed by Henry Kissinger when he was in cahoots with Richard Milhous Nixon of baleful memory. Both writers are moralists in the modern manner, which is to say they exhibit no set of principles or virtues that any moral philosopher ever heard of would describe as a moral system. Nonetheless they are avid to condemn their victims for being so shockingly naughty and worthy of contempt. Why they get so hot under the collar I have no idea. Possibly they see anger as the path to what the philosophers call the good life.

Hersh accuses Kissinger of most of the very same low deeds that he himself commits. In the opinion of Richard Grenier, the novelist and sage who championed Hersh for this award, Hersh is bullying, unscrupulous, vindictive, self-serving, and hypocritical. What is worse, he is a composer of tedious prose. Grenier estimates that he should have charged \$200 per hour just for reading the book. Hersh's idea of a reliable source on the Paris negotiations ending the war in Vietnam is the good government crowd in Hanoi, where he went in August 1979 and reported "there is no gap in Vietnam between the life of the people and

the life of the officials." Hersh's idea of reliable sources on Kissinger are those who have gone on record as loathing him, though often even these sources rebel, as did former U.S. Ambassador to Chile Edward Korry, who calls Hersh "a consistent liar" and more.

Ephron's artistry is different. She is a celebrity who dips into the heroic moments of her life and merchandises them for all her fans. In days of yore some people sold their bodies and were scorned. Today our celebrities sell their names, their misadventures, anything that will enrich them; and they grow more celebrated. Ephron sets out to portray her second husband as a jackass, and it is suggestive of her prodigious tastelessness that though she succeeds she makes herself look worse. Once again George Nathan's maxim is vindicated: "Whom the gods would destroy they first make famous."

What is it that both these books lack? In fine and in sum it is dignity, which, I suppose, explains why they were so celebrated to begin with. □



DOPED

A decade or so ago all the progressive cognoscenti were in the ardors for idealizing various drugs: marijuana for the small fry, LSD and the like for the Big Leaguers. I personally recall a distinguished professor—so distinguished in fact that *Playboy* magazine quoted him regularly—who pontificated to his students on the benign qualities of LSD. One of the cant terms used to sanitize the drug issue was "victimless crime." The ardors have now been spent. Yet, as with so many crucial matters about which Americans should be in accord and resolute, we remain ambivalent about eliminating drugs.

Nancy Reagan and other worthies campaign against drugs. Therapy centers are established to rehabilitate the basket cases. Nonetheless drugs are used widely and with a certain social cachet. As a nation we are not serious about drugs. The drug laws are er-

atically enforced, and some are not very stringent. In fine, as with so many other progressive enthusiasms that came out of the 1960s, though we have learned from experience the progressives are still around to prevent us from acting upon our bitter knowledge. The victims of the so-called victimless crimes pile up, but our attempts to eliminate the drug culture are rendered futile by the same people who liberalized our views on drugs years ago.

In late December one of the most gifted men I have ever known died tragically and mysteriously in California. Through much of his youth he had been one of America's great athletes. Ultimately he became the greatest springboard diver in the world. Today his family is baffled and grieving. He and they are just so many more victims of the last decade's victimless crimes.

Cocaine had been one of the small

congeries of calamities associated with his name toward the end of his life. At the beginning, charm was one of his calamities. From the perspective of middle age I now look back and recognize that he was from the start elevated above his peers by extraordinary charm. What is more, he could orchestrate brilliant moments of hilarity, for his sense of humor, too, was uncommon. I doubt that the charm and humor were there in the end.

Recalling the widespread drug addiction that he witnessed at the Egyptian University in the late 1920s, the illustrious English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge writes in his memoirs of "the stupefied faces and inert minds." His description comports with the dozing lumps of blissful stupidity so clearly observable among today's habitués of cocaine and all the other less celebrated drugs. I hope my friend never lost his charm and his laughter, but I know better.

In the end he had lost practically everything but the fidelity of his family. Precocity and intelligence had been with him from grade school through college and his early days in business. In everything he was a success, and he was rarely frivolous, for under his charm and All-American good looks there was grit. I never saw him blow any challenge. Certainly not the Olympics, though he was the youngest boy ever to win his event.

When his friends and relatives paid their last respects they kept repeating "He had everything." It was not a judgment but a question. All were left pondering how and why so gorgeous a life could end so tragically. Why my old friend turned to cocaine I cannot say with certitude. Some consider it glamorous, and some resort to it when the spirit seems to flag. For all it is a sweet escape.

Yet you have to be somewhat of a fool not to notice that it is also a cer-

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C A P I T O L I D E A S



SMITHWICK AND THE HIVE

Ed Meese is once again in the news, having been nominated to replace William French Smith as attorney general. This is still only Day Two, as I write, but one senses a hostile media swarm shaping up in the coming weeks. As a *Washington Post* editorial candidly warned on Day One, "Nothing about this transfer is likely to be tranquil. Fasten your seat belts." Ed Meese, don your beekeeper's mask. The Justice Department has been and has largely remained under Mr. Smith's tenure a strategic cell of the Hive, and the bees certainly don't want it to be occupied by someone who "sends the wrong signals." So they will attack, unless I am much mistaken.

On Day One I read, also in the *Washington Post*, that Smith "has been praised by many in the administration and in Congress for his stewardship of day-to-day operations." That was Mary Thornton's way of telling us that Smith, his cronyship notwithstanding, had been considered Hive-harmless.

Tom Bethell is The American Spectator's Washington correspondent.

I'm sure that William French Smith is an awfully nice man, but he is unfortunately the kind of fellow who tends to undermine interest in the Republican party among the educated classes: the country club lawyer who earns a ton of money, spends an inexplicable amount of time on the golf courses of Palm Springs, and thinks of Washington as a place where you have an opportunity to drive about in a chauffeur-driven limousine if you have the right White House connections—this being thought of in the corporate

community as the American equivalent of a knighthood.

It has been one of Ronald Reagan's most serious weaknesses as President that he has appointed a number of such people to important jobs in his administration; as though he had no idea there is a war in progress—an ideological one. One also thinks, for example, of his appointment of Charles Wick to head the U.S. Information Agency. Reagan seemed to regard the filling of such important posts as nothing more than a chance

to reward some of his rich California friends. These people in turn understood that this meant they would have a deferential retinue and a limousine, and photographers from the society pages would take pictures of them as they set off for the theater in the evening; their wives might even make the "ten best-dressed" list. Of course the salary wasn't so hot, but they already had more than enough money, most of them.

Was there no political goal to be attained, in the mind of his Cronyship, Lord Smithwick, you may wonder? Why yes, an important one: the reelection of the President. This was the precise political equivalent of the "bottom line" of profit and loss that the chairman of the board would be worrying about in the corporate sector.

Okay, but were there no actual policy goals to aim for—government programs to be developed, changed, or abolished? If you don't mind, please, Rt. Hon. Smithwick is too busy for such details. At the moment, as it happens, he is on a golf cart in Palm Springs and when he gets back to

