

**GOOD AS GOLD, by Joseph Heller. Simon and Schuster, 447 pp., \$12.95.**

## Fathers and schlemiels

MARK SHECHNER

**I**N ALL OF HIS NOVELS, Joseph Heller reminds us of how central rage is to our fiction, and how necessary fiction is to our rage. For though he may not be the angriest novelist in America—and competition for *that* honor is fierce indeed—he has been the most successful in persuading us that his anger grows out of a valid assessment of contemporary life. Upon its appearance in 1961, *Catch-22* began to give instruction to the rebellion that was gathering in the universities. Its madcap vision of an absurd military world, with its depersonalized chain of arbitrary command, its casual unconcern about death, and its intimations of universal conspiracy, was all but canonical to the imagination of “the Movement,” eclipsing the more contemplative versions of the absurd that had held sway since the 1940s. Heller’s Yossarian, who takes to the trees, naked, in protest, replaced Camus’s Meursault and Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon as a plausible image of modern man, just at the moment when the prevailing question changed from whether to commit suicide, to how to strike back. *Catch-22* was the 1960s’ most typical literary product, a book that not only captured the rebellious mood of the decade, but also, as a mixture of vaudeville and terror, helped define its style.

Though Heller’s second novel, *Something Happened*, with its grim and relentless realism, seemed at first glance a puzzling evasion of Heller’s genius for mordant slapstick, it now seems just the sort of sequel a *Catch-22* might pro-

duce: light years away in technique, perhaps, but loyal in its social point of view. Substitute a middle-management executive, Bob Slocum, for Yossarian, and the world of white-collar drudgery and ambition for that of wartime terror; then throttle the pace down to a bare crawl, and you have *Catch-22*’s claustrophobic vision of contemporary life, deepened and domesticated. *Something Happened* enunciates the same view once again: a war of each against all, in the context of a corporate world in which the chain of command is fundamentally a chain of humiliation.

That is certainly the perspective one gets after reading Heller’s new novel, *Good as Gold*, in which the same bleak determinism is still in evidence, but the stifling and conspiratorial hierarchy is transposed from the air force and the corporation to the family—where, after all, we tend to look for it in a proper Jewish novel, which is what *Good as Gold* attempts to be. Its hero, Bruce Gold, is, like Bob Slocum, another schlemiel with ambition, whose schemes come to nothing. At forty-eight, Gold is an English professor and a writer of some small accomplishment; he is esteemed largely by former college acquaintances who are after him to write for them. One, Maxwell Lieberman, is a reactionary editor of an obscure “little magazine”; he is a *Luftmensch* turned *Realpolitiker*, who sounds like a cross between Emmett Kelly and Irving Kristol, and who has been trying for years to accept tainted money if only he could find someone to offer it.

Another, Pomoroy, is executive editor of “a thriving, faintly disreputable, book-publishing house,” who has given Gold a sizable advance to write a study of “the contemporary Jewish experience in America,” a subject of al-

lure to Gold, whose experience has been quintessentially Jewish, but in precisely those vague and hybrid ways, common to the second generation, that elude his understanding. The third is Ralph Newsome, who has moved into the White House as a high-ranking but unspecified assistant to the President. He claims to have interested the President in Gold’s essays, and to be scheming to obtain for Gold a high governmental appointment. About all he comes up with, though, is a seat on a farcical Presidential Commission on Education and Political Welfare, which turns out to be dedicated entirely to the political welfare of the commissioners. As the reader may guess from even this sampling of Dickensian types, the action in the book is lively and intricate, and if it is not so extravagant as the hijinx of *Catch-22*, certainly it is far more spirited than the somber realism of *Something Happened*.

**G**OLD IS NOT JUST A writer and would-be Washington bureaucrat; he is also a family man, which is largely that side of his life where the “Jewish experience” comes into play. He is joylessly married to the passive Belle, a plump, matronly, and good-natured woman who says little and accedes to nearly everything. Bruce and Belle have three children: two grown-up sons and a daughter of twelve, Dina, who is wiser than her years, smarter than her failing grades would indicate, and tougher than her father. Gold doesn’t amount to anything of interest as either a husband or a father, but as a son and a brother he is a spectacular failure. He is the next-to-youngest in a noisy Jewish family of five sisters, four of them older than he; an older and more successful brother, Sid; an eighty-two-year-old, Kafkaesque father who despises him; a mad stepmother, who does little else but knit away at an endless and mysterious garment; and more in-laws, nieces, and nephews than he cares to keep track of. The trouble is that they can all keep track of him. He holds a special place as the perennial kid brother, the egghead and schlemiel par excellence who is destined to

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fumble along in life with his head in the clouds and his feet in dogshit.

Family gatherings yield predictable confrontations: Gold's latest triumphs are routinely deprecated as failures, and the overabundance of kugel, kishke, and kasha turns to ashes in his mouth. Thus, when Belle innocently announces to the assembled family that her husband is writing a book on the Jewish experience, Sid demands immediately to know "whose?" and the father snorts, "What does *he* know about being Jewish? He wasn't even born in Europe." Even Belle's lame boast that her husband is getting a twenty-thousand-dollar advance provokes the father's condescension: "That ain't so much. I made more than that in my time." And so it goes, from put-down to put-down, until Gold, pushed beyond endurance by some patronizing gibe by Sid, bursts out, "Sid, you're fucking me over again, aren't you?" And the father jumps to his feet and brings down the house: "He said fuck? Fuck, he said? I'll kill him! I'll break his bones. Someone walk me over to him."

Ever since Philip Roth and Woody Allen dragged the dinner table into the center of Jewish culture, this scene of tumult around the table has come

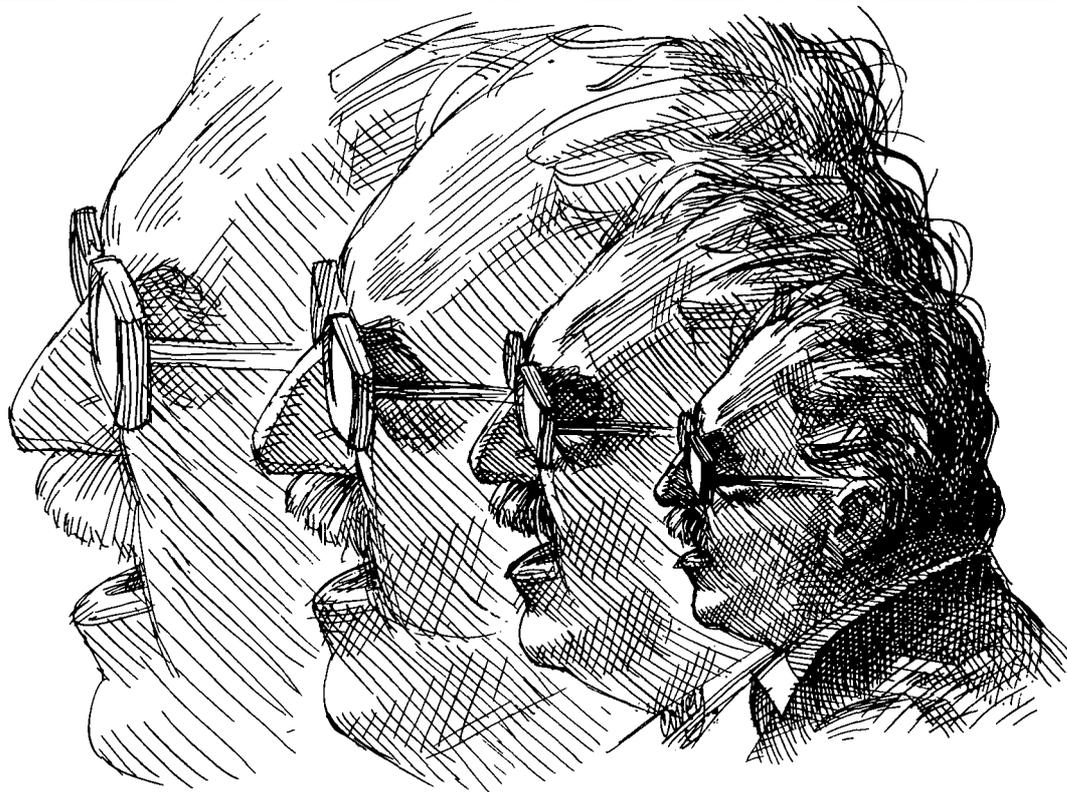
down to us billed as a Rich Cultural Experience, which puts less combative forms of dining on the defensive and pronounces such social habits as table manners and polite small talk to be mere evidence of Anglo-Saxon fastidiousness. In its robust vulgarity, goes a popular formula for Jewish culture these days, is its strength.

Whether Heller had such current ideas about immigrant vigor in mind is anybody's guess, but his version of Jewish family life is a far cry from Roth's, however much the two writers may resemble each other superficially. Bruce Gold's predicament is too rigidly preordained, allowing neither the rich give and take of a Roth situation, nor the undercurrents of powerful but blocked love that explain what the aggression is all about. Bruce Gold's father will always defeat him, because Gold lacks the zest of life to strike back effectively. He inevitably retreats in a pout or a groan, covering his retreats with a volley of epithets. In *Good as Gold*, the family is a machine that does one thing only: humiliate Bruce. Even his rage doesn't really belong to him but to the situation, and thus gives nothing to his character. It is only the style of his inevitable surrender.

That is because Heller's own anger

is embodied in a myth, a stereotyped way of looking at things and measuring his own relation to the surrounding world. It is the myth that one's own humanity is unique, shared by no one else; indeed, that everyone else is mechanical, contrived, existing for one's own torment. Heller's novels all recall the observation of Dostoevsky's underground man on his alienation: "I am alone and they are *every one*," which might as easily be the motto of Bruce Gold or of Bob Slocum or Yossarian.

**T**HE MYTH OF THE ALIENATED and conspiratorial world finds its essential expression in the figure of the mechanical father, who bears for the son nothing but malice. In one form or another he is the real subject of *Good as Gold*, and the one unifying factor in what is otherwise a mishmash of discrepant styles and meandering events. First of all he is Julius Gold, who at eighty-two is more vigorous than either of his sons, and unremitting in his contempt for Bruce. "From the beginning," he tells the assembled family, "I knew he would never amount to much. And was I right?" But as if his clones were distributed through his son's life, repli-



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cas turn up everywhere. Bruce Gold's world has conspired to multiply mechanical fathers infinitely in order to set roadblocks along all his escape routes to manhood.

Thus he is also Pugh Biddle Conover, father of the luscious Andrea Conover with whom Gold has an affair in Washington and whom he schemes to marry in the hope that she and her father might advance his prospects for a career in government. Conover is the *deus ex machina* himself, but not a redeeming one. He is a consummate power broker, a vicious anti-Semite, and a centaur on wheels who zips about his Virginia estate in a motorized wheelchair like a Tidewater Clifford Chatterley. And he thoroughly despises Gold: "I never met a man I didn't like," he tells Gold, "'til you." Then there is Greenspan, the Jewish FBI agent who is doing a security check on Gold and confides to him that his sexual adventures make him a *shonde* to his race. Greenspan is literally everywhere, since he has planted a listening device in every wall. When Gold asks Greenspan how he can get in touch with him, the latter answers, "Talk to the wall."

Add the invisible President, a secretive and ineffectual figure who prefers writing his memoirs to governing the nation and relays his admiration for Gold's prose style through Ralph Newsome. But the President's benevolence is only apparent. Operating in obscurity like the wizard of Oz, he manipulates Gold's life with rumors of impending appointments to unnamed posts, and stokes Gold's lust for advancement at any cost, thus bringing out the seamier dimensions of his ambition.

Finally, there is Henry Kissinger, the Jew as top dog. Gold, finding himself at one point unable to work on the Jewish book, decides to do one on Kissinger, for which he has already gathered copious notes and clippings. (It, too, will never get written.) Kissinger, indeed, is Gold's *bête noire*, the ghost in the machine himself, the bomber of Hanoi and the butcher of Cambodia, who would as soon kneel in prayer with Richard Nixon as terrorize a small nation. Gold's rage at Kissinger is boundless, and a substantial portion of the book is given over to tirades at Kissinger's treachery and narcissism. At such moments the mask of fiction drops entirely away, and it is Joseph Heller himself holding forth on "that fat little fuck," "the shuttling

little bastard," "the prick," and "the bustling *bonditt*." Indeed, he subjects Kissinger to the bitterest denunciation of all: that he is the Jew turned Nazi, and that "it was disgraceful" that he "should be gadding about gaily in chauffeured cars, instead of walking at Spandau with Rudolph Hess."

There is something decidedly wrong with this, and it is not that Heller has broken any known rules of social decorum in letting his aggression show. God knows, Kissinger has it coming. It is rather that in dropping the mask this way and exploding the fictional medium, Heller gives in to his anger rather than putting it to work, and he thrashes about in torment precisely where he should be cunning and deliberate. Thus the full horror of Kissinger, which has not registered in the public consciousness even now, is never cast into a controlling image, but rather is dissipated in a barrage of scattered accusations. In *Catch-22*, Heller's rage exfoliated into the most ludicrous and chilling sorts of imaginative extravagance, but in *Good as Gold*, the extravagance is largely verbal.

**A**S A RESULT, TOO MUCH of the book seems arbitrary and uncontrolled, invented out of desperation rather than imaginative need. Heller never decides what sort of book he is writing, a novel of domestic crisis, or a social document, or a political exposé. Thus the book shuttles back and forth between urban decay and family oppression, and spirited cartoons of politics at the top in which Heller tries to recapture the magic of *Catch-22* and play up the absurdities of power by exaggerating its derelictions. Heller's gloom is constant, but disparities in style and focus are never reconciled. In walking through Coney Island, the scene of his childhood, Gold falls into a Spenglerian funk; here, amid the debris of urban degeneration and the landscape of teenage anomie, is the future. "Someone should do something," thinks Gold. "Nobody could. No society worth its salt would watch itself perishing without some serious attempt to avert its own destruction." Here is a jeremiad worthy of Saul Bellow at his most Sammler-esque, though the underlying politics are far different from Bellow's, since Heller's vision of social chaos on the bottom flows from a critique of organized gangsterism at the top.

But the gangsterism at the top is not defined beyond what we already know

about the Nixon White House, and is treated as a cartoon that derides everything and thus explains nothing. Sandwiched into this dismal view of our political destiny is Bruce Gold's family romance: the romance of an undecipherable Jewish identity yoked to the struggle with the terrible father, in whose power is somehow contained the mystery of the elusive Jewishness. There is material here for two or three novels, which Heller has tried to synthesize into a single statement. But the themes in the book don't connect. Perhaps that is because Heller's angle of vision is too narrow to give him the links between Gold's private crisis and his public activities, and therefore to give his life a credible shape. Or perhaps it is that all that rage was too great this time to be contained by anything as formally demanding as "the novel." In either case, to know why the book fails to cohere, I am certain, would be to know more precisely what it is really about. □

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## Talking with Joseph Heller

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CHARLIE REILLY

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**Q:** MY CONGRATULATIONS on *Good as Gold*, it's a remarkable book. In fact, I think it has that harmony between humor and subtle profundity that you handle as well as anyone writing today.

HELLER: I'm glad you liked it. I'm pleased you enjoyed the humor too because I was just reading a very perceptive review by a professor named John Aldridge who called *Good as Gold* the bleakest of my three books. I think he used the phrase, "an extension of Heller's darkening vision." The more I thought about it the more I could see what he meant.

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