

A Prize-Winning Novel

By Simone de Beauvoir

MADELEINE CHAPSAL

"An intellectual is not just one to whom books are necessary, but any man whose very life is controlled and disciplined by an idea—no matter how simple it may be."

—André Malraux

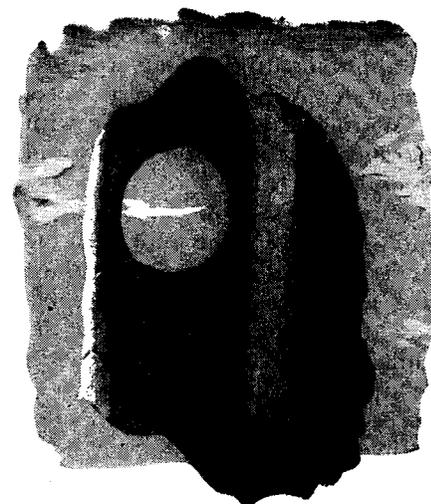
PARIS
IN FRANCE intellectuals enjoy a higher standing than they do in the United States. People listen to what they have to say; youth in and out of school looks to them for guidance; they are not restricted to the campus. But when they go in for politics, they are no longer trusted and people marvel at them. It is as if these delicate indoor plants could not withstand the light of action. How wrong this generalization is, we can see when we consider that one of the men whose influence has been most deeply felt in the politics of our world, Karl Marx, was a bookworm. We also forget the influence exerted on the politics of their times by writers like Lamartine, Hugo, or Jefferson. The mind and the pen are redoubtable weapons that cannot be laughed off. Yet we must admit that the intellectual in politics is sometimes a comic character.

The pathetic side of the intellectual has been delicately portrayed by Simone de Beauvoir in her

novel *Les Mandarins*, which won the 1954 Goncourt Prize. In old China the mandarins were public servants; today the word is used to define those men who find themselves separated from the masses by their own intellectual attainments. It is with humor that Simone de Beauvoir, who is one of them, describes the tormented adventures of writers and thinkers—these overexcited, irritable, unstable characters who are always questioning the wisdom, the usefulness, and the purpose of each of their actions. It took courage for Simone de Beauvoir to write this book, for the one protagonist who immediately conquers the reader in the space of one paragraph is a natural man of action, not a self-made one, and he turns half the world upside down without indulging in much reflection.

But Simone de Beauvoir is rewarded for the hard task she undertook. By writing about men corroded by their inner life, perpetually busy reconciling irreconcilables—their ideals, their private lives, and political reality—she has written the most humane novel that has appeared in France in recent years.

Humane, for there can be no more representative description of man than one that presents intellectuals,



forced by their very craft to harmonize the happenings of their lives and the dictates of their consciences. It is also a novel that is true in the purest sense of the term, for Simone de Beauvoir, a philosopher, cannot handle fiction otherwise than by describing step by step things she has experienced.

Leaving the Cloister

This truthfulness of *Les Mandarins* is particularly striking because the whole book retraces the life of that group of intellectuals of the Left to which Simone de Beauvoir belongs along with Jean-Paul Sartre. Almost literally she follows the sequence of recent history. The war imposed upon French writers an obsession other than with their writing. When peace came many of them found it impossible to cloister themselves again in their work.

"We have always thought that one doesn't write for writing's sake . . . the little lights along the Tagus, you can't describe them when you know they light up a starving city," she says in *Les Mandarins*.

Simone de Beauvoir shows how, in order to improve the condition of other men, some intellectuals founded a party, ran a newspaper, and ventured into political maneuvers. Actually, Sartre did found the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*, and Albert Camus ran *Combat*. It was the period when the Communists were in the de Gaulle Government and when, in the optimistic climate of the postwar years, at a time when de Gaulle was conferring with Stalin, many Frenchmen of good will thought it would



be possible, after the collapse of fascism, to march together with the Communists toward definite goals. For intellectuals, in whom individualism is an occupational trait—since they draw their resources from their own selves—the course for France was quite clear: Keep an equal distance from the Americans and from the Russians. It was what was called “neutralism.”

We all know what followed. The world was split into two blocs, and the so-called neutralists found it nearly impossible to avoid entering the one or the other. Then came the bitter quarrels, the agonizing reappraisals in public, the breakdown of the R.D.R., the return, more or less complete, of each mandarin to his loneliness. Lately even Sartre and Camus have split.

Truth and Expediency

Without recounting exactly each fact of this sad story, Simone de Beauvoir reveals its inevitable causes, and its impact on the lives of the people concerned. Political truth is sometimes different from plain truth, and those men who are accustomed by their craft not to accept anything but unalloyed truth recoil in confusion and horror from political expediency. But they do not want to be pure intellectuals either—which means professors, writers and so forth—and claim adherence to a conception of life that they cannot fight for. Is only despair left to them? Yes. But they do not give up. Isolated from the public and from each other, these left-wing intellectuals stick to their principles and go on believing in the ultimate victory of their own private ideal.

Perhaps Simone de Beauvoir is right: The frail intellectual, so exposed from the moment he leaves the shelter of his study, yet indestructible, is a major protagonist of our own times.

THIS NOVEL does not forget women. In addition to the political tribulations of the intellectuals, Simone de Beauvoir once more exposes her own conception of the drama of modern woman. The reader will remember the ideas of *The Second Sex*, summed up by a phrase of Kierkegaard inscribed in that book: “What a misfortune to be a woman!

And yet the worst misfortune when one is a woman is not to understand what a misfortune it is.”



SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S novel is an original book which suffers from the fact that the writer is not an artist. *Les Mandarins* is correctly written, but without the pace, the perspective, the inner harmony that are style. For many French writers and critics, style is all-important. Simone

de Beauvoir's lack of artistry made many of them indignant; some slammed down the book; others studiously collected its every awkward phrase.

Nevertheless, Simone de Beauvoir won out over all the French novels published in 1954. Her success with a national readership supremely concerned with artistry may seem to be a paradox. But the reason for that success is that we French, to a greater or lesser degree, are all steeped in humanism—in that concern for the individual which Simone de Beauvoir herself defines so well in her book: “Nothing in the world is as important as the death or the suffering of a simple human being.” Or, in another passage: “Literature is made for men and not men for literature.”

A Psychoanalytical View Of Beethoven's Last Years

LEE CULPEPPER

BEETHOVEN AND HIS NEPHEW, by Editha and Richard Sterba, M.D. Translated (*meisterhaft*) by Willard R. Trask. Illustrated and annotated. *Pantheon*. \$5.

IN THIS unpleasant but interesting *tour de force*, two ex-Viennese psychoanalysts, both musicians by avocation, draw on their skills and professional bias to produce their study of Beethoven's relationship with his nephew Karl.

The subject seems unpromising—millions have lived full lives, incomparably richer for Beethoven, without knowing or caring whether he had a nephew. But when we learn that the composer's last twelve years were blighted by his preoccupation with Karl, that only the flow of Beethoven's genius allowed him to go forward producing the late quartets, the last symphony, and the triumphant “Missa Solemnis,” and furthermore that this anxiety may even have precipitated his death, we see that the book's somewhat morbid concentration on certain aspects of his family troubles and of his turbulent and much-discussed personality is of legit-

imate interest to all who seek to go deep into Beethoven's life.

Compulsive Parenthood

At the age of eighteen, this genius became head of the family, which since the mother's recent death from tuberculosis consisted of Ludwig's younger brothers Karl and Johann and their father, the tipsy, broken-down tenor who had been his harsh taskmaster. The arrangement gave Ludwig free rein to dominate his two juniors, whom he regarded as his children. Johann “escaped” and became a prosperous supplier to the Austrian Army during the Napoleonic Wars, but Karl, a minor civil servant, remained generally submissive until his lingering death from tuberculosis in 1815.

In his last will, made the day before he died, Karl appointed Ludwig guardian of his nine-year-old son, also named Karl. But knowing that Ludwig detested his wife Johanna, he added a codicil: “. . . I by no means desire that my son be taken away from his mother, . . . to which