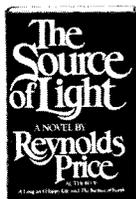


A Minor Faulkner

by Benjamin De Mott



The Source of Light
by Reynolds Price
Atheneum,
320 pp. \$12.95

Hutchins Mayfield, hero of *The Source of Light*, is a 25-year-old Southern prep schoolteacher with literary ambitions who's ceased for the time being to wish he was in Dixie. At the start of the book he's discovered saying farewell to old family haunts and retainers in North Carolina and environs, just prior to leaving for a two-year stay at Merton College, Oxford. Much of the subsequent narrative focuses on Hutch's first experiences of Europe (Rome, Wales, and the Scilly Isles, as well as Oxford), and upon various homosexual and heterosexual attachments he forms on foreign soil. The guilt induced in the hero by his flight is intensified by the death of his father (Hutch returns home to bury him), by his girlfriend's troubles (she aborts a child that may have been Hutch's), and by the not-so-veiled chiding of a number of loving elders who write him long letters ruminating about his clearing-out. But Hutchins Mayfield hangs tough: The book's closing scene shows him discussing Lewis Carroll in a pub with his Oxford tutor, and one concludes that, no matter what new pressures are exerted on him, he's likely to keep to his own schedules of self-development in the immediate future.

A fifth novel by an author who won fame with his first book, *A Long and Happy Life*, published nearly 20 years ago, *The Source of Light* continues a family saga begun in *The Surface of Earth* (1975). And there's much to admire in its pages. Reynolds Price has

an unplodding imagination; he's perfectly capable of diverging from conventional realism long enough to describe a visit by the ghost of Robinson Mayfield to his son Hutch's bedside—the purpose of the visit is to bestow a blessing—or a moment when Hutch himself, thousands of miles distant from his father, is so powerfully touched by a premonition of the man's passing that he's brought to his knees to pray there'll be no pain.

In addition to the family feeling and



Price—"no freshness or surprise."

sense of the past that mark the novel, there's an intelligent awareness that one effect of integration will be to make blacks and whites strangers to each other. (The book is set in the mid-Fifties, on the eve of the civil-rights struggle.) I particularly liked the author's readiness to savor interruptions of the narrative business at hand (space is made, for instance, for two highly enjoyable cameo appearances by the actress Vivien Leigh). And the

structure of values throughout is admirable. *The Source of Light* is a 300-page narrative wherein absurdist savagery has no place and the idea of gentleness as a value isn't once mocked—which is to say, it's a rarity.

It's not, though, speaking bluntly, a compelling or exciting work of fiction. One failing is that the novelist merely assumes that the question whether his hero quits Europe or stays is momentous, but never demonstrates that it is. I was troubled too, by Price's difficulty in finding distinct voices for his characters. Nearly everybody in the book—from Southern preppies to Dilsey-style servants, to Oxford stonemasons, to liberated American women—speaks a lingo best described as Southern-clever-wry, and in time the sameness of the speech becomes disconcerting.

Finally there's the Faulkner problem. Significant differences exist between Hutchins Mayfield and Faulkner's young masculine heroes—and between Faulkner's old people and Price's—and between Faulkner's literary allusions (the Bible and Keats) and Price's (the Bible and Shakespeare)—and between Faulkner's conviction of the uniqueness of the Compsons and Price's conviction of the uniqueness of the Mayfield clan. But while the differences exist, I'm afraid they're not as noticeable as the resemblances. The overall impression left is that of a fictional world rendered indistinct by the spreading shade of the great Faulkner tree; no action or person or style of utterance quite manages to achieve energetically independent being. Dignity and intelligence are always visible in *The Source of Light*; what's missing is the quality of freshness and surprise that makes novels novel. ■

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Fiction Briefs

The Men's Club

by Leonard Michaels
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
181 pp., \$10.95

BECAUSE HE THINKS it holds fewer possibilities for emotional chaos, guilt, and gonorrhea than an extramarital one-night stand, the unnamed narrator of *The Men's Club* joins six other men for an evening of guy-talk. Initially, this novel seems to be about male consciousnesses being raised while the rest of the party has retired to the women's room. But nothing so banal doing. Instead it's a book in which humor, resentment, and brutality bubble forth from men trying to make sense of their lives with women.

In his previous (and acclaimed) two collections of short stories—*Going Places* and *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*—Leonard Michaels often examines the same theme and always with the same implied conclusion: It isn't love that binds the sexes but an awful compulsion to cling together in ineluctable, primitive combat. Whether or not this view is unrealistically narrow, the stories hit the target and quiver like steel arrows because Michaels's prose is a combination of the spare and the melodramatic encountered only in rare masterpieces like Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*.

Michaels's long-awaited first novel, although funny, painful, and unflinching, runs into trouble because he hasn't applied the lean, vigorous strokes of his stories to a novel. He has simply relaxed the grip he maintains on the brush of the shorter form and has let it stray, thus providing both too much and too little. *The Men's Club* is worth reading not because it is a novel that cuts deeply, but because it is like a crucial *chapter* in a novel that cuts deeply.—DAVID FINKLE

Original Sins

by Lisa Alther
Alfred A. Knopf, 608 pp., \$13.95

THE FIVE ill-fated protagonists in Lisa Alther's latest are finger puppets, not

people. The story opens with a quintet of promising youngsters perched in a weeping beech and ends, after much waggling of novelistic devices, with their own progeny playing in the same tree. What becomes of their hopes and dreams in between?

Pretty Sally marries her cousin, the football hero, and settles into a life of daytime soaps and Eat Me Orange nail polish. Her bulldog husband Jed, still abiding by the tenets of his high-school coach, scrambles for promotion to management of the local mill. Sally's brainy sister Emily and Jed's brother Raymond flee Tennessee for New York City where they rally to the rhetoric of the popular political "isms" of the Sixties and Seventies. That leaves Donny, the maid's grandson, a "good niggah" with a dead-end job as janitor until he skips town and sprouts an Afro.

Growing up and leaving home are the themes here. Separation from family and inherited territory is the struggle represented. Oh, how hard it is, the author says; so hard, it's never really accomplished. We're all locusts who have shed our shells, "helpless larvae, cold, naked and unprotected." Despite the tired one-liners ("He picked her up

out of the dirt and turned her into the clod she was today") and the easy pokes at stale dogma, we are supposed to take this book seriously. We are supposed to care about these predictable characters and their predictably aborted pursuits of happiness.

No go. Alther's *Kinflicks* was glib, but *Original Sins* is more so. In the former, the thoughts of a dying mother on the subject of her protean daughter kept the novel several cuts above sitcom. In the latter, canned laughter prevails. —LAURA GERINGER

Seagull

by Yashar Kemal
translated by Thilda Kemal
Pantheon, 250 pp., \$11.95

SINCE PASSION and desire are rarely the stuff of stories about children, Yashar Kemal's *Seagull*, a grand and ramshackle examination of precisely these emotions, is a noteworthy addition to that small list of vigorous books that can be read by both adults and children for equal if not exactly the same exhilaration.

Salih, a young Turkish boy living in a contemporary but not altogether mod-

