

occasionally addresses this issue directly, as in this defense of his most controversial book: *"Beyond Freedom and Dignity"* was a misleading title. It suggested that I was against freedom and personal worth. . . . [But] if acting for the good of the group is positively reinforced, people will feel as free and worthy as possible. I am in favor of that." For the most part, the notes are brilliantly amusing sketches that read very much like French *mélanges*, with challenging and sometimes disturbing reflections of the forces that shape our lives.

—ROBIN BROMLEY

**Exit House: Choosing Suicide as an Alternative**

by Jo Roman

Seaview Books, 204 pp., \$10.95

JO ROMAN'S is a voice from beyond the grave, but that does not mean we should listen to her. On June 10, 1979, Mrs. Roman committed suicide, after having written a letter to 300 friends explaining her choice of "rational suicide as a human right," after having produced enough tape for the television documentary *Choosing Suicide*, and after having thought for many years about taking her own life. She was by all accounts a woman very much loved by her family and friends and a woman, by her own account, very much in love with death itself.

In the autobiographical section of *Exit House* Mrs. Roman reflects on the numerous funerals her minister father took her to when she was a little girl and how much fun they were compared to the rest of her daily life. She tells of her early attempt at suicide and quotes from notes on her recovery made at the time by her then-lover. She details her fondest fantasy—the creation of an "Exit House," where people could go and take their own lives provided they are "bona-fide residents of New York City forty years or older."

No doubt this book will engender discussion, but it is a minority report. Most people do not want, as Mrs. Roman did, to go gentle into that good night, let alone discuss it in loving detail for 200 or more pages.

—ARTHUR SPIEGELMAN

**The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's Final Solution**

by Walter Laqueur

Little, Brown, 276 pp., \$12.95

IN THE FALL of 1942, a young Pole named Jan Karski went at great risk to his own life to warn the leaders of the West—including British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, President Roosevelt, former President Herbert Hoover, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter—that Hitler's final solution to the Jewish problem was outright mass murder. Karski might as well have stayed at home. According to this gripping, disturbing book by the scholar and political analyst Walter Laqueur, Karski was just one of several thousand Cassandras roaming Europe at that time, and his fate was much like the others—he was listened to and then either ignored or disbelieved.

Laqueur's thesis, proved with an admirable sparseness of language and lack of hysteria, is this: "Millions of people cannot be killed without participants in the murder and without witnesses." Like plumes of smoke rising from the Auschwitz chimney stacks, the truth was to be seen, if not to be noticed, if not to be accepted. "I can't believe you," said Felix Frankfurter when apprised of the situation by the brave young Karski. A high State Department official feared that talking about the death camps might lead "to increased pressure from all sides to do something more specific to help these people." The British worried that if they publicized what they knew it would lead to anti-Semitism at home and harm the war effort.

*The Terrible Secret* is a low-key, let-the-facts-speak-for-themselves indictment of Allied politicians, neutral countries, the Vatican and the Red Cross (who knew what was happening to the Jews and and kept silent out of fear). Laqueur's study covers 1941-42. By New Year's Day 1943, the Nazis claimed they had exterminated 2.5 million Jews. One only wishes that this brilliant book was fiction not fact.

—ARTHUR SPIEGELMAN

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Thomas H. Middleton

## Weasel Words

**W**easel words, says *Webster's Second New International*, are "words that destroy the force of a statement by equivocal qualification as a weasel ruins an egg by sucking out its contents while leaving it superficially intact." According to Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, the phrase was popularized by Theodore Roosevelt, who said in 1916, "You can have universal training, or you can have voluntary training, but when you use the word *voluntary* to qualify the word *universal*, you are using a weasel word; it has sucked all the meaning out of *universal*. The two words flatly contradict one another."

I take it on faith that weasels actually suck eggs. In *As You Like It*, Jaques says, "I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs," so it seems clear that weasels have sucked eggs at least since Shakespeare's time. I haven't seen more than two or three weasels in my life. If I ever see one suck an egg, it will be an unforgettable experience.

The phrase *weasel words* came to my mind a few weeks ago when I was visiting friends in Stamford, Connecticut. My host and I were to catch the 9:04 to New York. We got to the station at about 9:00, bought our copies of the *Times*, and waited. And waited. At about 9:15, the loudspeaker squawked, "The 9:04 to Grand Central has been indefinitely delayed." We had known it was definitely delayed. Now we knew it was definitely indefinitely delayed. The loudspeaker voice then went on to say, "Thank you for your cooperation."

It occurred to me that the alternative to our cooperation would be to form an angry mob. "We apologize for the inconvenience" would have been more suitable. "Thank you for your cooperation" was not appropriate.

On further consideration I realized

that this was not an instance of weasel words. It was plain, old-fashioned balderdash, and I thought of the phrase *twaddle terms*.

Twaddle terms are the basic currency of most advertising, and they are increasingly common in phrases like "Thank you for your cooperation." The fad in communications to the public by business seems to be to thank us for one thing or another whether we deserve the thanks or not. Signs used to say No Smoking. Now they say Thank You for Not Smoking. We see people smoking as they read a sign thanking them for not smoking.

You call to see whether Aunt Lucy's flight will arrive at 6:13, as scheduled, and they say "Thank you for calling

**Businesses now thank us  
for our "cooperation" —  
deserved or not.**

Fly-By-Night." They'd say "Thank you for calling Fly-By-Night" even if you were calling to ask why in hell your luggage went to Zurich when they flew you to Topeka.

This seems as good a time as any for me to mention in public that I find 6:13 and similar exactitudes puzzling as scheduled arrival times for airplanes. I don't know what they mean. Is 6:13 the time the wheels touch down, the time the wheels come to a halt, the time the Fasten Seat Belts sign goes off, the time the ramp is locked into place, the time the doors open, the time the stewardess says, "Thank you for flying Fly-By-Night," or the time you find out your luggage has gone to Zurich?

To my way of thinking, it's a minor miracle when a plane that is scheduled

to land at 6:10 touches down at any time between 6:00 and 6:20 after a flight of a few hundred or a few thousand miles. To give the estimated time of arrival as an actual point in time seems ludicrous. Possibly the airlines have arcane reasons for listing such arrival times as 1:12 and 1:17, but I strongly suspect that these, too, are twaddle terms, designed to make the airlines seem needle-sharp, to give the impression that they deal in on-the-button precision. Come on, Pan Am, United, Fly-By-Night, and all the rest of you, if you say Aunt Lucy's flight will land at 1:15, and we see Aunt Lucy before 1:25, we'll think you're just great.

Among my favorite twaddle terms is "For your convenience . . ." You go into your bank and there's plaster all over the floor, the ceiling has been ripped out, there are exposed wires to trip over, and you see a sign that tells you "For your convenience, we are temporarily destroying the bank. Thank you for your cooperation." When the remodeling is over, you discover it was done so that they could install Naugahyde-covered ropes for you to stand between while waiting for a teller.

There's a sign in my bank that I like so much I copied it down. It says, "To help reduce your wait in line please complete your deposit and withdrawal slips at the desk provided."

Perfect English and perfect balderdash. There is no way that completing those slips at the desk provided will reduce your wait in line. I don't see how it could affect your wait in line one way or the other. What it will do is reduce the wait in line of the people behind you. A reasonable request, but couched in twaddle terms. Nevertheless, I'm perfectly willing to comply, and I wouldn't mind a little sign thanking me for my cooperation. ■