# Allegory, Acid, and Argot fail to salvage fast-aging novel

**TOO FAR TO WALK, by John Hersey. Bantam, 218 pp., 95c.**

Writing about college students is a difficult thing at the best of times. One can only be impressed by the dreadful sameness of most students, and when the enterprising writer attempts to illuminate the individual characteristics that do exist, he is all too prone to lapse into the banality that mars, for example, the student-produced film *Winter Kept Us Warm*.

Hersey, fortunately, manages to handle the problem relatively well, curious as his methods may be. He escapes triteness by a process of exaggeration. John Fist, in whose mind we wander through most of the book, is bland compared to the people he forms relationships with —Breed, who claims to be an agent of the Satanic organization; Mona, an unusually well-educated prostitute; and Margaret, an innocent young girl who proposes a motel room on the first date.

Unbelievable characters all, and even more unbelievable that Fist should sell his soul to Breed, take Mona home to mother, and let Margaret fall asleep in the motel room while he quotes French couplets. But the very incredibility of the plot saves it from banality.

Fist himself is a modern-day Holden Caulfield (the comparison with Salinger is inevitable, and might as well be made here) with ordinary sophomore neuroses, most of which boil down to the simple question: Is it all worth it? He re-enacts, with Breed, the time-honoured Faust theme (Fist, Faust —get it?), complete with twenty-six week contract signed in blood.

And so John Fist attempts to find fulfillment through evil, consorting with lewd women, performing daring midnight robberies, and finally embarking on a lengthily described experience with LSD. He emerges a transformed man, refuses to renew his contract with Breed, and decides that it is not too far to walk to his lectures.

The framework of the story is simple and well-worn: college student finds meaning in life. But Hersey has done a creditable job of dealing with some of the problems of this decade, problems Holden Caulfield or Stephen Dedalus were never confronted with—LSD, protest marches, and matter-of-fact sex. In fact, so topical is the book that it is in danger of becoming dated very quickly—even now, only a year after the first hard-cover edition, certain words ring harshly on the ear as being the slang of another era.

The LSD sequence is a beautiful piece of fantasy writing, hinting at enormous capabilities in Hersey's prose style; but it is disputable whether or not it is as accurate as it is eloquent.

The trip takes the form, in many places, of a dream in which the action is completely separate from the environment of the dreamer. It has always been my understanding that the hallucinations (or whatever they are properly called) of LSD are intimately bound up with the user's actual surroundings.

As for the Mephistophelian allegory, far-fetched as it may seem in a modern novel, it at least serves to pull the story out of the realm of "a day in the life" writing. And, like so many of Hersey's other little devices, it helps to make the characters a little better than ordinary. But it is an artifical device nonetheless—because of it the novel has one foot in reality and the other in fantasy, while a fusion between the two is not really carried off.

A good novel, and very readable. A memorable novel? Probably not, because despite his literary trickery Hersey has not been able to say anything significant. It goes down as one of the novels which has succeeded in taking the pulse of a new generation; but that is not enough. Fist is not a real person the way Caulfield, Dedalus, and the other lasting heroes of fiction are real persons; hence he is bound to pass away with the coming of new neuroses, new hang-ups—and new slang.

—Terry Donnelly





# films

*The Sand Pebbles* gets off to a frightfully bad start.

"If you're good at something, they can't bust you down. Like me, you know, with the engines."

Mosch.

Jake Holman's simple philosophy of uninvolvement is soon complicated. An American gob in China during the rise of Chaing Kai-Shek, Holman (Steve McQueen) is transferred to the gun boat San Pablo—you know, to make the engine run. But Jake is special because he knows *why* the engine runs. Great.

Ever since he came swinging across the boob tube in "Wanted: Dead or Alive", McQueen has projected the image of the tough anti-hero, which Jake Holman definitely is. But Holman becomes more than this.

Admittedly, he is good with the engines. The navy takes care of him and his life is reduced to a mechanical reaction homogeneous to the steam engine with which he is illicitly in love. But like most love affairs involving steam engines, it is only a defence mechanism. Underneath, Jake is a frustrated individual—one of many in the film.

He thinks he has finally escaped superior orders in the engine department when he is assigned Chief Engineer of the San Pablo, only to find his beloved engine in the hands of a gang of coolies, adopted by the ship to do all the work.

Holman's attempt at uninvolvement weakens under the attack of Shirley Eckert (Candice Bergen), an ingenuous school teacher abducted to do Good in the backward nation by an evil missionary named Jameson (who comes out with such unpatriotic obscenities as "Damn your flag! Damn all flags!") She attempts to break through Jake's tough outer defence by appealing to him with pastoral images of pleasure, which he gallantly rejects.

Meanwhile, back at the brothel, Frenchy (Richard Attenborough) has fallen in love with the bonded hostess, Maily, played by Marayat Andriane—a local discovery who actually looks like she might be worth discovering. Although two hundred dollars is a little higher than the going price (this is the amount she owes for her freedom), there is an obscene scramble to cough up the money because she has never been "top-side", and it follows that the economic value of the goods is much greater.

Anyway, Frenchy marries Maily, envisaging the same pastoral images of pleasure. These, unfortunately, involve repeated dips into the chilly harbor waters, which have severe detrimental effects to his physical health.

Once it gets moving, *The Sand Pebbles* turns out to be a great movie. Richard Crenna turns in a great performance as the captain of the San Pablo, frustrated by prohibitive orders. His philosophical tirades on the importance of appearance and responsibility to duty are both humorous and pathetic.

Disgraced by the near mutiny of his men, he decides that the San Pablo will make a last heroic move to restore his honor, thrust deep into the heart of China, and rescue Jameson's mission at China Light. In a well constructed battle scene, the San Pablo breaks the boom slung across the river by the Nationalists and sails upriver in a truly heroic fashion, only to find that Jameson doesn't want to be rescued. (For the captain, this fact is completely irrelevant.)

In the end, Holman is won over by his latent idyllic imagination and attempts to remain at China Light with Shirley. But even his attempts at desertion are foiled by the return of Nationalist troops. In one last undessembling act, he sacrifices himself for her, detaining the enemy so she can escape.

It is a temptation to let this film become a microcosmic analogy of the present Far East conflict. While many parallels can be drawn, the story is tied more closely to its intrinsic theme than to any allegory, and as such is outstanding.

—Gordon Auck