

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Love Story - Erich Segal

New American Library 1970

131 pgs. paperback \$.95

- a review by Kevin R. Bruce

Love Story by Erich Segal - 131 pages of a simple, snort, bitter-sweet tragedy that had been crying to be written ever since the novel's own popularity began to defeat those very advantages of communication which are peculiar in the novel, and which made it popular in the first place.

It's difficult, even in literature, to maintain the purity of something gone commercial. It seems the potential for financial success which the novel has practically had a monopoly on in the literary field during this century, has made professional writers virtually prostitute their intellects in an attempt to cater to the sheep-like demand for sensationalism, suspense and adventure, sought after by all those who read novels as they would watch T.V.; to be intrigued and entertained but never for the purpose of involvement or understanding - and thereby evolves the distinction between a good book and a great piece of literature.

And oddly enough, whenever a novel with a message does spring up, its author still somehow finds it necessary to insert that theme into a structure just seething with that sort of fairy-tale-fiction-quality, belonging to that James Bond type of novel of the masses. They still feel that the word "novel", implies the requirements of elaborate plot, extraordinary action, and a setting amplified out of any realistic proportions. In an effort to wring every monetary ounce of value possible from these works, they are sent the inevitable route, to semi-underground films, invariably classified as the brain-child of an eccentric genius experimenting with various new forms of film-making techniques, which therefore accounts for, and justifies, the reason why you didn't quite understand what the whole thing was supposed to be about.

Don't misconstrue these statements to mean that I come anywhere close to being against adventure, suspense, elaborate plot, the genre of the novel itself, or the fact of its wide acceptance, etc. Novels of entertainment have their place, and novels with a viewpoint would hardly be good or popular without also being entertaining. It simply seems basically clear to me that entertaining novels with a message are worth more than novels which are merely entertaining, and should be cultivated with a little more patronization than has been heretofore displayed before the appearance of Segal's endeavour. If the dominant tone of a society's literature reflects that society's taste, we could have our mouths washed out with soap and it would hardly matter - we must have built up enough resistance by this time to be immunized against sensitivity. People like Segal shouldn't be voices from out of the literary wilderness - they should be put off into their own exclusive paradise; for where simplicity and natural directness are coupled with sincerity and feeling, there is no need to be afraid to pick the apples.

Segal knew, and has proven to all those who didn't, that books with character can become best-sellers as well as those without. But my praise of Segal is not unconditional. His book has many flaws, some of which are anything but minor. And recently (for this is rather a belated scansion of the book) a wave of criticism has arisen in a backlash against the phenomenal popularity of *Love Story* (over nine months as no. 1 on the New York Times bestseller list) which labels Mr. Segal's treatment of actual life as both naive and trivial.

And certainly to some extent these are valid points; for instance the general plot goes thusly - one very rich athletic Harvard boy named Oliver Barrett, who is living in the prodigious financial and athletic shadow cast by his apparently unconcerned and uncommunicative father, falls in love with one poor but charming Radcliffe bitch named Jennifer Cavilleri, whom he cannot help marrying despite the fact his father therefore disowns him. However, all is frugal bliss until Jenny discovers she has an incurable disease which after a large amount of tenderness and tears, results in her death, bringing all of Oliver's happiness to ruin but nevertheless reuniting him with his father in the throes of his grief.

I'm sure you'd agree, and I'd be the first to grant the point, that you don't need a program to know which player is which in this game. I'd also be the first to volunteer that I would rather know them intimately enough not to need the program, and while Segal may not quite know how to go about it in terms of action and style, he certainly does know what elements of form and content play most heavily upon a reader's sentiment, and he uses them.

Firstly he creates an independent, masculine boy with heart and sensitivity, and then has him fall in love with an enchanting little-girl, all-woman figure, for the love of whom he forsakes all, only to meet with a cruel destiny, completely undeserving of so pure and innocent a couple so totally in love with life. If you don't cry at that buddy, you probably tear the wings off flies or run around the co-op pulling fire alarms.

Sure, the rich kid who chooses love instead of money is nothing new (remember *The Graduate*) and you can read about the generation gap in any newspaper (save perhaps *The Daily Gleaner* in which case you probably wouldn't understand it anyway) and all the noble "c'est la vie" that Jenny tries to console Oliver with so that he may go on living, are not new story ideas. But so what? Noone has a patent on the recurring aspects of life, and its the fact they reoccur which makes them work - the word for that is archetype. Perhaps there is a built-in best seller in each successive generation by simply weaving the most effective eternal facets of history into the new social pattern which has evolved, thereby making what has been forever real, realistic to those who cannot quite feel a strong affinity with the plights of people in the context of a social era they have only read about and never experienced. Dealing with universal and timeless topics should not be mistaken as being naive. Neither should extracting the essence and neglecting the unessential be taken as triviality. It is merely knowing how to produce a desired effect without the hindrance of complexity.

Segal however, cannot be accused of simply revamping. He adds some much-neglected and overdue touches which are peculiarly his. For example, Oliver and Jenny have one priority above all else, and that is their love (so far so good; all other novels glorifying love have given it the same precedence) but Segal goes out of his way to show how Jenny and Ollie, even in the fantasy of their love, are down-to-earth people who scrimp and sacrifice (not as most other novels imply, for the purpose of showing, that with love, materialism and other decadent values of democratic capitalism may be rejected without caring because the ideal love compensates) so that in the end (and Segal dwells upon

this) Oliver may receive the highest salary of any graduated Harvard law student. This is not only realism, it's not even American realism, it's democratic realism. All along, the vast majority of people in America have known you don't just turn your back on the American dream no matter how lofty your ideas and principles may have been when you were in college and the benefits of that way of life were handed to you. Somehow the forest seems dark and ugly, but the individual trees are nice climbing and give a cool shade. Segal finally put his finger on it even if he doesn't know it, and the American people have embraced it - even if they don't know why.

Jennifer and Oliver are just two people trying to make out (and yes - that is a pun). They have more in common with the average one of us than it would at first seem.

To the critics of *Love Story* Segal can always in the final analysis point to the sales chart and laugh, and I think I'll point to the same thing by way of recommending that you read the stupid little book - if only to find out why so many others have. At least it may be the start of better things to come - when, something on the right track makes money it's amazing how quickly the bandwagon gets crowded - the only problem is that the right track requires feeling as well as talent, and those who jump on for money may just tip it over and we'll be right back where we started - well, c'est la vie, Oliver!



KR