

# Ultimate negation negated in novel

*The Floating Opera* (Avon, 75 cents) is one of a series of three novels which John Barth, currently American's most fashionable novelist (last year it was Saul Bellow), planned to write about nihilism.

The third of these, *The Sot Weed Factor*, transcended its author's original intentions completely, turning into a wild satire on the historical novel which managed at the same time to be a serious comic novel about innocence with a plot which its author claimed was "more complicated than that of *Tom Jones*".

But *The Floating Opera* remained securely nihilistic.

Its narrator, Todd Andrews ("tod" means "death" in German, but we are coyly counselled not to worry about this) recounts the events of a single day of his life, that on which he decided to commit suicide.

His father had taken a similar decision some years earlier, in 1929 to be exact, but apparently for a reason which Todd finds impossibly frivolous: financial disaster.

Since that time, Todd had worked on a mammoth, deliberately "impossible" project—an Inquiry into the causes of his father's suicide; an attempt to chart exhaustively the motives that could have driven him to such an act.

One morning Todd awakes to the realization that there is absolutely

no reason why a man shouldn't commit suicide.

Being decisive and cold-blooded by nature, Todd decides in a flash to live one more day in as ordinary a manner as possible, and then to make away with himself.

In describing the course of that day, Andrews finds it necessary to range far and wide among the events of his previous life to provide us with background sufficient to comprehend the action. In this manner Barth contrives to turn the narrative of a day into a narrative of a life.

The personality of Todd Andrews comes across with great vividness. As Kurt Vonnegut has remarked, the novelist cannot show us a character whose soul is really empty without writing a boring book, but he can show us a character who *thinks* his soul is empty. Such a man is Todd Andrews.

There is, of course, a built-in happy ending; Todd has to renounce his suicide plans if the book is to be written at all.

A considerable portion of the novel's suspense resides in the reader's waiting to find out how Todd gets out of his so-logically-arrived-at-impasse.

It would be a shame to reveal the ending. But it is pleasant to find a novelist who dares to return to the Victorian happy finale.

—Jenson Phrobsmoth



**AND AT THE SIGNAL, GENTLEMEN, FIRE**—These dedicated folks aren't really Mafia gangsters disguised as violinists; they're the Hungarian String Quartet, and if you join the Chamber Music Society you'll hear them perform early next January.

## What's a friend--read on buddy

**THE WAYS OF FRIENDSHIP**, by Ignace Lepp. Translated from the French. Macmillan, 1966. 127 pp.

How does friendship spring up? How is it to be distinguished from love, and what are its sexual implications? Can two women be friends in the same way that two men can? These are some of the questions discussed in Ignace Lepp's *The Ways of Friendship*, just brought out in an English edition by the Macmillan Company.

Dr. Lepp is a Parisian psychiatrist, an ex-communist turned Catholic priest, and something of an existentialist into the bargain. He draws upon the many experiences of his own as well as those of his patients for illustrative material. The present volume serves as a sort of companion to

his *Psychology of Loving*, which has achieved some fame.

But it is significant that this is a book about friendship, and not about love. From the beginning Lepp casts aside the Freudian notion that the libido, the source of emotional energy, is specifically sexual in nature. Emotional energy, he says, is diffused in two primary ways; through love, which is primarily sexual, and through friendship, which is "the most universal and . . . the noblest of all forms of interhuman communication, the only one capable of dissolving our loneliness".

### COMMON INTEREST


True friendship does not come about through a sublimated sexual attraction, but through a point of common interest; unlike love, which may be unilateral, friendship depends on a reciprocal dia-

logue. One of Dr. Lepp's favorite phrases to describe this is "existential communion". He is very careful to distinguish true friends from mere companions or comrades, who do not partake in this communion.

Friendships are most easily attained between men; women are capable of achieving friendship on the same plane only if they shed the ancient ideas of their subservience to man and engage in more than "empty gossip" with one another. Lepp hesitatingly admits that a man and woman may have a completely non-sensual communion, but warns that Eros may enter the picture all too easily: "To try to establish a friendship with a person of the opposite sex on a purely spiritual basis is to invite painful disillusionment."

—Terry Donnelly

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