

CHOPPING BLOCK



by Jens Andersen

Like many literature addicts, I buy books two or three times as fast as I read them. Thus, though I bought Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* when it came out over a year ago, I didn't get around to reading it until last month. Contrary to the hosannas printed on the back of the book, I found it to be trash.

To begin with, *Famous Last Words* is not what it purports to be. It is supposedly the story of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley - in the book a friend of the poet Ezra Pound - in reality a fictional character from a Pound poem. During the 1930's Findley's Mauberley is, like Pound, a fascist apologist, but becomes caught up in a vaguely-defined plot to take over the world - a plot involving the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Joachim von Ribbentrop and a blue-ribbon cast of dissolute reactionaries.

The book begins in early 1945 with Mauberley fleeing north from Italy as the Third Reich crumbles. He finds refuge in the Alps at a resort famed for being a watering hole of the 1920's luxury-liner set. Here, on the walls of one of the abandoned rooms, he writes the story of the conspiracy.

The problem, first of all, is that the story is 80-90 per cent unadorned description: Ribbentrop does this; the Duke does that. Considering the circumstances - Mauberley has gone through agony during the war - something more personal and thoughtful would have been likely.

Worse, Mauberley continually talks about things he could not possibly know about. For instance, it is possible that Mauberley might have been told, as a minor member of the conspiracy, that an SS fellow by the name of Schellenberg was developing suspicions about Ribbentrop's behaviour.

But it is highly improbable that he should be able to reproduce photographically a meeting between the two men from which he was absent, down to the little details such as the exact words in the conversation, the exact moment Schellenberg bit into the sugar loaf, and how Ribbentrop used his "dove-grey" gloves to wipe the dust off the edge of his desk. At a later meeting, which Mauberley was also absent from, he "recalls" that Ribbentrop forgot to zip up his fly.

In short, Mauberley's first-hand account is blatantly and absurdly omniscient. Under the circumstances he would more likely be trying to tie together and make sense of the significant facts among his limited knowledge of the conspiracy, much as Conrad's Marlowe does in *Lord Jim* (a book which could teach Findley a thing or two about first-person writing).

Nor do the book's defects stop here. Its characterization is abominable. Mauberley himself is a zombie - an almost complete blank. He has stray emotions and thoughts now and then, but they are hardly revealing. Or consistent. One moment he will be recounting, in cold, clinical detail, how he listened to a woman's story about Mussolini's thugs beating to death a poet. Then the next moment he will be gurgling over a

sooty prehistoric handprint in a cave as some sort of symbol of the indomitable human spirit, blah, blah, blah.

But most of the time he merely sits around making notes about other people's clothes, the dishes served at meals, the decor in fancy villas, and other trivialities. How he fell for fascism, how he became disillusioned with it, how he joined the "conspiracy," and all the interesting questions the book should grapple with, are left unanswered.

The Duke of Windsor, by contrast, at least has a character, flat as it is. He is weak and neurotic. Like a TV screenwriter, Findley milks him for all the weirdness and decadence he can wring out of the caricature. Ho hum. The Duchess, Wallis Simpson, is portrayed as being greedy and ambitious because the world has been hard on her. She is the closest thing to a human being in the book.

Two other caricatures are Quinn and Freyberg, the two American officers who find Mauberley's testament (and corpse) and incessantly debate his moral status as a possibly-reformed fascist. Quinn is a forgiving, understanding guy; Freyberg is a ruthless inquisitor. None of their arguments are above the level of a squabble between two eighth grade Social Studies teachers.

It doesn't occur to either of them, as they examine Mauberley's story, that Mauberley is talking about things he has never seen or heard; dallying at unusual length over descriptions of dinner table settings et al; putting heavy stress on the spy-thriller aspects of the story (like the Ribbentrop-Schellenberg cloak-and-dagger stuff, the attempted kidnapping of the Duke and Duchess, and their bid for escape from the Bahamas); and, most curiously, avoiding any elaboration of the conspirator's plans, the rationale behind their fifth-rate James Bond maneuvering, their ideas and politics, their personal relationships, or even how these disparate people met and organized.

Of course, all this comes from Findley, whose level of political sophistication can be deduced from this line in the book:

This was the age of the Treaty of Versailles, when half the countries of Europe disappeared overnight into the gulleets of the other half who woke up suffering from indigestion.

As every schoolboy knows, exactly the opposite happened. The Treaty of Versailles created countries by breaking up the three great continental empires. Only Yugoslavia could be said to have swallowed any country.

So why was *Famous Last Words* praised in every publication from the *Edmonton Journal* to *Atlantic*? The answer is that it has all the trappings currently in literary vogue: endless agonizing and pontificating on the human condition, appropriate sensationalism (Yes Virginia, an evil person in the book cuts off someone's balls), quotes from famous poets that reviewers know only by name, astonishing melodrama (like the suicide of Mauberley's apparently wise and sensitive father, who opens the book by wisely and sensitively jumping from a building in front of his twelve-year-old son), etc.

The bizarreness, the philosophical maunderings, the people with ridiculous or non-existent motivation - all of these blemishes are trademarks of today's literature, from Thomas Pynchon to Tom Robbins, from John Irving to Brian Moore. And the critics eat their stuff up. Apparently they have been swallowing garbage for so long, or they are so lacking in brains and education, that they have forgotten what literature is.

PS: As to the question which should have been behind Findley's book - "How do apparently intelligent people fall for messianic movements" - read Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." The poem, written before Pound became a fascist, still provides some clues about the ideas and conditions which can lead people in that direction. Silk, champagne and truffles have nothing to do with it, Findley to the contrary.

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