

# A Finite Forgiveness

**491**, by Lars Görling, translated from the Swedish by Anselm Hollo (Grove. 282 pp. \$6), presents some Scandinavian juvenile delinquents in a "parable nightmare" of evil and forgiveness. Gertrude Samuels, a New York Times Magazine staff writer, has frequently covered delinquency here and abroad.

By GERTRUDE SAMUELS

**T**HE TITLE of this book derives from Matthew 18:21-25:

Then came Peter to Him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

The 491st sin is presumably the unforgivable one. Lars Görling, a thirty-five-year-old writer and film director and a dutiful detractor of mankind, throws into his nightmare of a novel more than one unforgivable sin. Even so, that documented in the last few pages is sufficient.

The contemporary writer who has a nightmare and a disgust with man to record has the problem of drawing in the reader with an insight and artistry that will hold him. The problem becomes acute when practically every one of his characters is a symbol of unrelieved knavery or savagery. The art of telling is present in *491*, effectively evoking curiosity about men and boys so depraved. But when do the evil-doers start their own forgiving, start to become liberated and creative? One reads on, hoping for answers to questions. But the lens is cloudy.

This parable nightmare, first published in Sweden in 1962 and translated into English by Anselm Hollo, concerns the experiences of one Krister, a twenty-three-year-old Christ-figure who is an assistant supervisor of a rehabilitation project for adolescent youths. A brooding, fumbling idealist, Krister forgives and forgives his charges, "tail between his legs: he didn't want to hear, didn't want to get involved in any way." As a result, he is constantly at the mercy of some of the most hardened delinquents in literature, seven little beasts aged fifteen to seventeen who have been taken off the street or assigned to the experiment by the Criminal Court, and

whom Krister is expected to help develop socially acceptable attitudes.

Krister remains a shadowy, symbolic figure, given to sermonish rationalizations about life and good and evil. Not so the boys. These are bottom-of-the-barrel gangsters and psychotics. Inside the permissive hostel or out on the town, they commit fiendish and dehumanizing acts. The narrator, Nils Nisse, who rejects Krister's love, is the most sadistic of the lot, for he at least has a mind.

Periodically, the boys switch from leaders to led in their criminal and sexual expeditions. At loose ends most of the time (curiously enough, considering that they are "in treatment"), they continue their thieving ways, try to set up a black market in liquor, watch the perversions of the young prostitute Steva, cynically submit to homosexual acts, witness rape scenes—always scheming to destroy the only real friend they have, the forgiving Krister.

The wild and stupid Genghis alone attracts some sympathy. He suffers from his fears, invites blows, is led by the others into murderous acts. That

Krister, who never gets angry, is foredoomed to die wretchedly becomes clear in the early pages. He does manage to say, slowly and quietly, that he dreams "sometimes, about a kind of Judgment Day; not that anyone should be judged, only that all would suddenly see."

These boys, despite their leadership potential, are never helped to see. Thus their brainless sadism is unconvincing. The comparison with William Golding's children in *Lord of the Flies* is inevitable. But the latter could feel compassion and weep for the end of innocence. Görling's one-dimensional delinquents are given no such saving grace. Man is evil; forgiveness is stupid.

*491* and a ninety-minute film based on it have stirred controversy in Sweden. The film has been heavily censored in Germany and Japan, and in this country it was seized by Customs as obscene matter. The furor extends to the novel. But the basic problem is not the alleged pornography or the use of four-letter words; it is the focus, or . . . its lack.

At the conclusion of the novel the outlook is simply more of the same man-is-evil depravity, with no liberating of the human spirit in sight as the result of Krister's sacrifice. Thus the parable fails. Instead of holding some hope for the future, one can only feel immense relief that at last the narrator "got what was coming to [him], for everything."

## Love on a Long Shot

***It Only Hurts a Minute***, by Don M. Mankiewicz (Putnam. 312 pp. \$5.95), deals with some compulsive gamblers in a loveless world. Jay Bail is a free-lance writer and critic.

By JAY BAIL

**D**ON MANKIEWICZ's first novel, *See How They Run*, was published fifteen years ago to a great deal of critical acclaim. It dealt with the futile efforts of three men—the general manager, the trainer, and the jockey—to win a horse race in spite of the owner's decision to lose it. The characters were drawn in a brutal, highly realistic manner, showing how each reacts to honesty and then betrayal. Sam Gleason, the trainer, sums up their hopes when he notes, "They say there's honor among thieves. There can be honor among the rest of us, too."

It is this search not only for honor among others but for truth with oneself that motivates Lew White in Mr. Mankiewicz's present novel, *It Only Hurts a Minute*. The sole truth Lew knows is

that he is a compulsive gambler who will sacrifice anything to bet on horses, dice, or cards. He wants the kind of "love that helps when help is possible, and shuts up the rest of the time," but he is also aware, in his own way, that this is hardly love. Kathy, a chip girl in the club where he works, tries to get him to quit playing for the house and to accept a position as sales manager with a new company. He is only remotely interested. A girl named Lisa shows how easy it is to get into her car and simply drive away into a series of jungle days.

We are here in a loveless world where men and women are devoted to themselves, where the safest and simplest sex is what is bought and paid for. The perpetual scene is a race track where winning on a long shot is ace and outconning a con man is king.

There is Lisa, who gambles because it breaks people up into winners and losers. There is Billie, a stable girl who will sleep with anyone who furnishes the stable. There is Andy, willing to do anything for anybody as long as it results in a winner. And there is a horse race

ending in an unfair disqualification, making Lew twenty thousand dollars richer.

But most of all there are Lew and Lisa. We are shown their relationship in impersonal progressions, from not caring for one another but living comfortably together, to the realization that Lew is no longer a winner. The jungle days collapse in a period of unconsciousness and a final realization that there are no answers. In the end, nothing is certain. The worst is over but at the same time it has not yet begun.

Mr. Mankiewicz is an exceedingly skilled writer. Whether he is showing us the inside of Lew's doubts or the almost precise mathematical deductions of gambling, he is more than convincing. His dialogue is crisp and reveals just enough and no more of the characteristics of the various people. And he is constantly rejecting the obvious cliché and making a point while doing it:

Someday I am going to make a list of those simple phrases that people — schoolteachers, mostly—are always repeating, and that sound true because they are said so often, though they are actually just plain nonsense. No harm in trying. Better late than never. It's just as easy to do it right. Where there's smoke, there's fire. Honesty is the best possibility.

Mr. Mankiewicz's world is filled with a quiet violence, whether it is Sam Gleason wiping his muddy hands on someone's suit or Lew White trying not to become involved with people. It is a place where men are breaking out of their molds and then finding they have nowhere to go.



**Crackup on the Beach:** Anthony Masters, who at twenty-four has already published a successful set of short stories in England, has now produced a first novel, *The Seahorse* (Atheneum, \$5.75), about disturbed young boys and their equally disturbed middle-aged teachers in a progressive seaside private school. The protagonist, Paul, is dragged from the ocean in the opening pages, and throughout the book it swashes everywhere. In fact, everybody is at sea, especially Casey, a pathetic eleven-year-old abandoned by his father, who relies on an imaginary seahorse to champion him against the world.

It's an unpleasant world. Paul, a deeply self-absorbed and destructive man whose only child has died in a drunken-driving accident involving himself and his estranged wife, Meg, now loves young Casey in an obsessive and ambiguous manner. Storm, the school's dedicated but troubled headmaster, also loves Casey, and desires Meg, and fears

the growing madness of his spinster sister, Lettie, who obsessively and ambiguously loves *him*. Parallel nastinesses crop up on the schoolboy level: persecutions and sadisms and incests and homosexualities abound among these unhappy pupils. Still nastier versions of the struggle to survive are contemplated on the seashore itself, where trapped crabs and imprisoned seabirds devour one another or die. The novel concludes with a catastrophic wreckage of hopes on all levels.

Anthony Masters has evidently read L. P. Hartley, Richard Hughes, and William Golding, to his profit; yet for a book making implicit claims to psychological subtlety *The Seahorse* is often quite insensitively written. And occasional gobbets of "fine writing" do nothing to dispel a general impression of externality, intensities aimed at but not realized, a muffling uncertainty of tone.

Here is the author on Casey's fantasy life: "Amidst hard fact he wove skeins of illusion that ousted the material world, making its sterility of hard-won mediocrity ridiculous."

Paul and company are in the end simply not interesting enough—a bleak and surprisingly dull set. In this progressive school the staff-room discussion of problem children is on a Stone Age plane of awareness. Equally primitive are the violent personal confrontations. People bellow at one another, hit each other; but few insights emerge, either for them or (worse) for us. The adults don't seem adult, nor is the author's vision of them very profound. Perhaps that is why he is at his energetic best with the children, especially in the final scenes, where his aims seem less pretentious, his storytelling talents have full play, and some chilling effects are achieved.

—BERNARD MCCABE.



*"Though I find you very personable, Sylvester, I regret you're not suitable to my particular needs at the present time. I do, however, appreciate your interest and thank you for giving me an opportunity to consider you."*