

SOMETHING DIDN'T HAPPEN

by Morris Dickstein

Good as Gold

by Joseph Heller

Simon & Schuster, 477 pp., \$12.95

IN THE EARLY Sixties, during the vogue of the Jewish-American novel, when ethnic material was "in" and imitations of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth were beginning to dot the literary landscape, I heard of a minor novelist who had begun in desperation to do anthropological fieldwork. He haunted family weddings and bar mitzvahs to pump distant cousins for jokes and reminiscences. His conversation, once reasonably acculturated, took a precipitous slide into New York street talk, laced with vulgar or bogus Yiddish phrases no authentic greenhorn would ever have used.

Today the fashion for both ethnic and confessional novels has largely passed, but, by a curious time lag, third-rate Jewish novels still abound, books with no intrinsic connection to Jewish life or sensibility. Joseph Heller's first explicitly Jewish novel, *Good as Gold*, shows 20 times more talent than any of these, but it gnaws surprisingly on bones other writers have thoroughly chewed over. Heller has a distinctive imagination, a feeling for absurdity that struck a responsive chord in the mind of a whole generation, a gift for farce and satire so frenetically accurate it makes us howl. But for long parts of *Good as Gold* he keeps those talents under wraps. The book feels cobbled together; its plot lacks conviction. The big Jewish family scenes are too realistic, yet subtly off-key; and the pages sprinkled with Yiddishisms are out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the book.

At the beginning of the novel Heller's protagonist, Bruce Gold, a 48-year-old English professor with political ambitions, makes a deal for good money to do a quick book on the "Jewish experience in America." He feels remote from the subject, but it looks easy, since in a sense he has lived it. "He could toss it off



MELINDA KINGSLEY

swiftly once he had his material," he imagines. "Jews were a cinch. It was good as gold." He dreams of writing a best-seller, making a killing, but finds the going rougher than he expected. Gold tries to do research among his boyhood idols from Coney Island, who had always shunned him for his braininess. "I'm supposed to write about the Jewish experience," he complains to them, "and I'm not sure I ever had one. I have to make up a lot."

Gold's book within a book, written for hard cash, in some sense is the very book we read, *Good as Gold*, which is in part about selling out. On the basis of the novel's commercial prospects, Heller is said to have demanded a mil-

lion dollars, scarcely exorbitant today, and left his previous publisher when he didn't get it. It's obvious that Heller wrote *Good as Gold* more quickly than either *Catch-22* (1961) or *Something Happened* (1974). If he used up his military experience in the first book and his corporate experience in the second, why not his Jewish experience this time, meager as it may have been? After all, a writer has only so much capital.

In any case the wisecracking voice we hear in *Good as Gold* is familiar from the two earlier novels, and uniquely Heller's own, however threadbare the material. Though the people in those books were deliberately *not* Jewish, their cast of mind bore unmistakable

traces of the post-Kafka Jewish literary sensibility: nervous, agile, hilarious, paranoid, fatalistic. Bob Slocum, the "hero" of *Something Happened*, shows signs of the Jewish imagination of disaster, the bad habit of taking the whole world's troubles personally:

I've got anxiety; I suppress hysteria. I've got politics on my mind, summer race riots, drugs, violence, and teen-age sex. There are perverts and deviates everywhere who might corrupt or strangle any one of my children. I've got crime in my streets. I've got old age to face.

This genuinely Jewish strain in Heller's writing is why an actor like Alan Arkin had to play Yossarian in the film version of *Catch-22*, and why the Jewish subject of *Good as Gold* is neither alien terrain for Heller nor simply material for a potboiler about Jews and politics. *Good as Gold* differs from his previous books in its *Portnoy*-like looseness, its loss of rigor and precision: It's full of topical material and separate joke-routines, which the casual plot does little to knit together. Only the most obtuse reader could have taken the earlier novels for joke books about the army or the company, though they contained many screamingly funny lines. Heller's comedy was edged with horror—think of the soldier in white in *Catch-22*, whose "life" has been reduced to an interchange of fluids. Heller's humor had a way of setting a trap for the reader, making him pay for his laughter in hard emotional coin, bringing him face to face with bleakness, emptiness, desolation.

In his first two novels Heller seemed radically gripped by his material, exercising his obsessions by working them into the form and language. This scarcely happens in *Good as Gold*. Heller's literary genius showed itself especially in a certain rhythm, a subtle but needling texture of repetition which is simply absent from the new novel. *Catch-22* took shape not in chronological sequence but around the unfolding mystery of the death of Snowden, the catch of *Catch-22* itself, the raising of the bombing missions, and a hundred other intricately developed leitmotifs. In the next book Bob Slocum's mind pirouettes endlessly around a hollow core of old experiences, like tics of consciousness. Mostly they are things that did not happen, like Virginia, the girl he never screwed, or the speech he never gave at the last company convention; or things that horrify him, such as Derek, his retarded child, or Martha, the girl in his office who is slowly going crazy.

Like Beckett and Pinter, Heller at his best knows how to make the trivial

feel ominous through reiteration. This web of repetition makes the first 100 pages of *Something Happened* particularly brilliant; it locks us like helpless prisoners into Slocum's petty mind, and stirs up a terrific swirl of verbal energy that is not zany and explosive as in *Catch-22*, but burrowing, sinuous, and relentless. Slocum is all of us at our most grasping, selfish, and devious; but by confining us to his mean viewpoint for 592 pages, the book finally becomes as hollow and unbearable as its protagonist. The point about *Something Happened* is that hardly anything does. No one could accuse Heller of trying to be ingratiating.

Good as Gold picks up neither the bleakness of *Something Happened* nor the burning intensity of its writing; but it does borrow some of the negative qualities of its hero, its theme of mid-

Heller arraigns a part of himself in his stinging indictment of Bruce Gold.

dle-aged compromise and disappointment. Like Bob Slocum, Gold is selfish, manipulative, adulterous, remote from his wife, hostile or indifferent to his children, vain, and ambitious. But *Good as Gold* has a political dimension missing from the narrow gray-flannel world of the previous book. Slocum merely wants a promotion; Gold wants to be Secretary of State.

Heller intends him to be a devastating caricature of a neoconservative intellectual—not Kissinger, as advance rumor had it, but a sort of Jewish Moynihan. Once a believer in human betterment, Gold is now an apostle of benign neglect. He writes articles with titles like "Nothing Succeeds as Planned" and "Every Change Is for the Worse," which attract the attention of the President, who finds in them "just the excuse he needs for not doing anything." Gold publishes them in a *Commentary*-like magazine edited by a boyhood friend, Lieberman, who is as grubby and comically repulsive as any character in contemporary fiction. "All through college Lieberman's dearest wish for the future had been to manage a small, intellectual magazine. Now he had his magazine, and it wasn't enough. Envy, ambition, and dejection were still ravaging what few invisible good qualities he might have been born with."

Heller develops the links between Gold's politics and personality with great care. Gold instinctively practices his social views on his own family, withdrawing frequently "into the citadel of noninterference he automat-

ically chose whenever threatened by the encroaching personal problems of others." Yet we sense a good deal of Heller in Bruce Gold. In all Heller's books there's a distinct strain of misanthropy, a cool detachment from the human comedy, a sweeping cynicism about people's goals and motives. As a comic artist he makes the most of his Swiftian sense of the ridiculous, but for Heller, as for Swift, the satire devolves easily into the saturnine. At moments I'm reminded of Edmund Wilson's comment on the work of his friend Dos Passos: "His disapproval of capitalist society seems to imply a distaste for all the beings who go to compose it."

To his own great credit Heller is sufficiently alarmed by his own cynicism to attribute it to far from admirable characters like Slocum and Gold, who are the moral monsters of the novels they dominate. "All his words had a starkly humanitarian cast," Heller says of Gold, "yet he no longer liked people." To Heller neoconservatism is a politics of middle-aged disenchantment, social and political climbing (especially by Jewish outsiders), and heartless self-seeking. Gold "was losing his taste for mankind. There was not much he did like. He liked goods, money, honors." The context shows that Heller shares some of Gold's disenchantment, but he does not approve of it. If Bellow's novels since *Herzog* are idealized portraits of *Angst*-ridden Jewish intellectuals, *Good as Gold* depicts a seamy careerist underside, in which the book's own commercial aspirations are also implicated. Heller arraigns a part of himself in his stinging indictment.

What Heller doesn't consider in his attack on the neoconservatives is that most academics don't demand "goods, money, honors": They will sell out for very little. Besides, the real neoconservatives are mostly not converts or turncoats; they were middle-aged in their politics when still quite young. Heller's cynicism is unfair, for many of them may be sincere believers in the status quo, honest admirers of big business, the military, gunboat diplomacy, and right-wing governments.

Another satirical butt of *Good as Gold* is Henry Kissinger. Gold is obsessed with him and wants to prove, among other things, that he's not really Jewish. Hoping to write a book that will demolish him, Gold builds up a huge file of clippings, which he shares with us in great detail. Yet another of Heller's targets is the U.S. government, which may or may not be offering Gold a job (shades of Kafka's *Castle*). Gold's many conversations with Ralph Newsome, a friend on the White House staff, are masterpieces of

surreal double-talk—straight Marx Brothers—just the sort of mad dialogues Heller used in his previous novels to pillory the absurdities of large bureaucratic organizations. It should be clear by this point that *Good as Gold* is not one but several novels jostling each other, without the unifying stylistic and narrative rhythm of *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*. The Jewish family material feels forced and worked up; it's hard to know why Gold, who's such a big shot in the great world, goes to so many large family gatherings where he's always dumped on, and where it's difficult for the reader to tell his five sisters and numerous in-laws apart.

There are odd lapses in the satirical point of view which work to the book's detriment as fiction. The Bruce Gold who scorns Kissinger, not just for his pompous personality and his love of power but for destroying freedom in Chile and decimating Vietnam and Cambodia, is hardly the same character who is himself broadly satirized as a neoconservative trimmer and a worshipping of wealth and status. Heller can't resist using Gold as a vehicle for his own peevish and prejudices, which he spins out with hilarious vehemence and accuracy. The result is a very funny book but a weak and unconvincing novel. *Good as Gold* offers as many belly-laughs as *Catch-22*; there are pages we can barely resist reading aloud, gags we'll want to retell. But it's all too uneven, and when the satire ebbs, in the last 100 pages especially, the book turns slack and plotty, with little of real human interest to hold our attention.

Good as Gold is the closest Heller has come to writing a regular novel, a straight story, but what works best are the wild passages in which he is inimitably himself. These include not only the Kafkaesque exchanges with Ralph Newsome but Gold's dealing with two monstrous old men, his own 82-year-old father and Pugh Biddle Conover, the demented Wasp sire of his new Washington girlfriend. Gold hopes to take advantage of Conover's political influence, but the old man hates Jews and keeps calling him Goldfarb, Goldstein, Finegold, or Goldberg. ("I hope you will not allow an occasional extra syllable from an aging mind to be the cause of any serious misunderstanding between us.") The "esteemed career diplomat" also has strong opinions about hair(!) and hates men who are losing theirs, even if they're not a bit Jewish:

The bracing odor of liniment rising from Conover was metabolized liquor, the gleam of acuity in his penetrating eyes a flame of gifted lunacy. Gold was confronting another old kook. "Your health, you weasel,"

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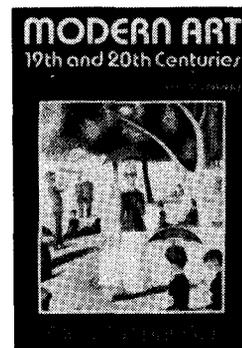
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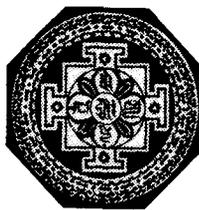
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Conover shouted with vigor, and swallowed deeply. "May all your troubles be little ones. I always knew Dean Rusk would never amount to anything, or Benito Mussolini. Too bald...."

"Bless you, my lad. Never circumcize a bus. They're not Jewish. Arabs wash feet. McGeorge Bundy is the warmest human being I ever met...."

In scenes like this Heller takes leave of the plodding actualities of the conventional novel, for which he has no special genius, and takes on "a flame of gifted lunacy" all his own. Heller's runaway riffs of surreal satire and winged fantasy are as brilliant as ever. But much of *Good as Gold* is too earthbound, too leaden, to really take off. ●

Morris Dickstein's most recent books are Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties (Basic) and, as coeditor, Great Film Directors (Oxford).

**Living with a Stranger:
A Discourse on the Human Body**
by John Stewart Collis
George Braziller, 203 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Henry McDonald

JOHN STEWART COLLIS, an Irish man best known for his book on agriculture and ecology, *The Worm Forgives the Plough* (1975), has organized his new work in the form of a children's book. It is about the way the body works and is divided into seven sections, with names like "We Nourish Ourselves," "We Stand Up," and "We Feel and We Think." It begins with an exemplary man standing in a field, and proceeds to "give" him internal organs, skin, and senses, as well as the abilities to speak, sleep, dream, and (with the help of woman) reproduce himself. The simplicity of its language is striking. An enzyme is defined, without elaboration, as "a substance which causes a change in another substance"; various parts and functions of the body are referred to as "stations," "factories," and "battle lines." Throughout the book we are confronted with the spectacles of cells, nerve fibers, and capillaries stretching from London to New York, from New York to the moon.

But *Living With a Stranger* is not, for all that, a children's book. Or, to put it another way, it is a children's book only in the most profound sense of the word—in the sense of being philosophical. That, anyhow, is the way I'm sure

John Stewart Collis would like us to think of his book. It is packed with references to and quotes from Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Hume, Bergson, even Wittgenstein, while the range of literary figures includes Shakespeare, Shaw, Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, Borges, and Blake, to mention only a few. One would be hard pressed to cite a case where the effort to humanize science—to balance the typically mechanistic understanding of human biology with what Collis calls a "poetic" one—has called forth such an impressive and numerous set of names.

Living With a Stranger is thus intended to be read on two levels—an elementary scientific one and a more sophisticated poetic one. Unfortunately, on neither of these levels does it accomplish its purposes. As an instructional text, the book has too many distortions, inaccuracies, and outright absurdities to be trustworthy. Collis thinks that a heart rate of 120 while under stress is "at danger point"; that homosexual behavior is "not found among the animals"; and that women are "physiologically" incapable of "genius." Even the material Collis gets right he covers too quickly, at times perfunctorily, while his intentional omission of illustrations and diagrams (he finds them "distasteful") makes many descriptions, for all his claims to "simplicity," difficult to follow.

As for his numerous references to the great writers, these are mostly superfluous, with only the most superficial connection to the topic under discussion. In the middle of the section on the composition of blood, Collis suddenly quotes a passage from a Thomas Hardy novel that describes a horse bleeding to death. In the section on skin, Collis quotes Satan in the book of Job, saying to God: "Touch his bone and flesh and he will curse thee to thy face." In neither case can we tell what the relevance of the passages might be, aside from the fact that they contain the words "blood" and "bone." Collis is particularly fond of quoting Shakespeare in this manner. For example, passages from Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, in which she cries "Out, damned spot," warrant inclusion in two sections of the book—the one on blood and the one on sleep.

Collis's intention, it seems clear, is to be eccentric and whimsical and, judged from this perspective, perhaps the worst one can accuse him of is *failed* whimsy. But the problem is really deeper than that; it is in Collis's narrow understanding of the nature of scientific knowledge. Throughout the book Collis propounds what he calls a metaphysical and teleological view of nature—one which sees the physical

world as inhabited by a disembodied "life force"—and contrasts this view with a mechanistic one that sees man and all other life forms as the product of blind chance and accident. The choice, says Collis, is between "sense" and "senselessness."

What Collis ignores, in framing his argument in these terms, is a good part of the intellectual history of this century. The task of finding an absolute basis of knowledge, either from a position wholly scientific and empirical or one wholly moral and religious, has largely been abandoned in favor of an attempt to understand and evaluate the social and historical context in which such knowledge has arisen. Such a perspective is reflected in a wide range of writers and thinkers. Those who have written on the biological sciences in recent years include Rene Dubos, Paul Weiss, Ivan Illich, and Susan Sontag. Such writers share, if nothing else, the sense that if science is to be humanized, its knowledge must be evaluated, at least in part, from a social, cultural, and even political point of view.

Collis, on the other hand, not only omits any discussion of the social and political role of medicine—his only complaint with doctors is that they are too "modest" about their accomplishments—but automatically assumes that any statement made in the language of physics and chemistry is purely mechanistic and hence ultimately "senseless." "What is oxygen?" he asks, answering immediately, "No one knows...." In fact, however, if Collis were really sincere in wanting to answer this question, he would find out what the atomic theory of matter has to say about it, then attempt to understand this theory in terms of the intellectual history in which it emerged. At least then all those philosophers to whom Collis refers might be put to some use. The ultimate answer to the question, of course, would probably still not be satisfactory and certainly not absolute, but at least one would not be driven to the false dichotomy of a humane, teleological view of nature and a mechanistic, scientific one.

In the preface, Collis explains that the title of his book, *Living With a Stranger*, refers to the disconcerting feeling he has had for so many years about his ignorance of his own body. "I am a person," Collis declares, in a characteristically high-minded fashion, "who knows what he doesn't know." If *Living With a Stranger* is any indication, he has not yet scratched the surface. ●

Henry McDonald is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C.