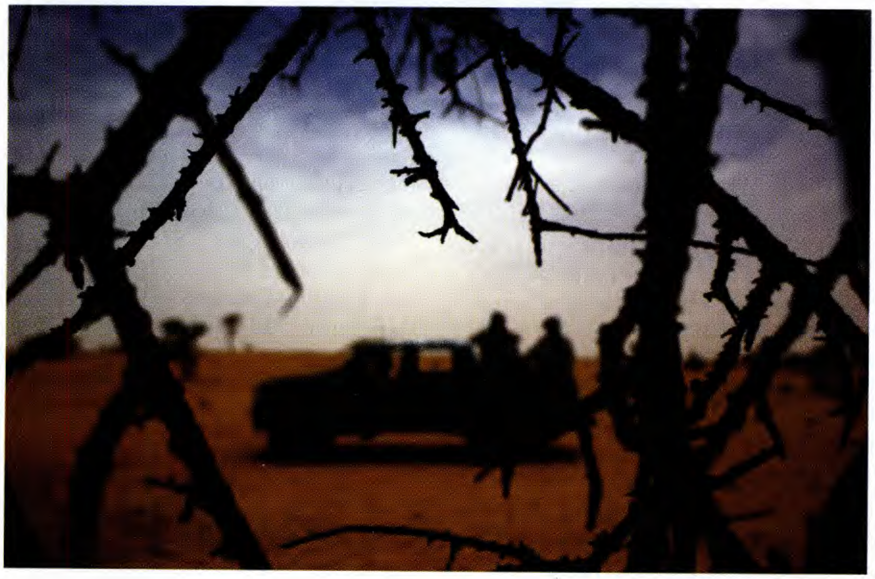
NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard



Picture yourself a postcard from Darfur, where, after the Antonov bombers and helicopter gunships have softened up their targets, janjaweed "faith warriors" ride in on horseback to burn down grass huts and murder Zaghawa villagers, for the greater glory of Chinese oil refineries and Sudanese Arab self-esteem:

> The Janjaweed man who had tied me to the tree saw my daughter running to me. He lowered his rifle and he let her run into his bayonet. He gave it a big push. The blade went all the way through her stomach. She still cried out to me, "Abba! Abba!"
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> Then he lifted up his gun, with my daughter on it, with blood from her body pouring down all over him. He danced around with her in the air and shouted to his friends, "Look, see how fierce I am," and they chanted back to him, "Yes, yes, you are fierce, fierce, fierce!" as they were killing other people. . . . What was he? A man? A devil? He was painted red with my little girl's blood and he was dancing. What was he?

Daoud Hari's **THE TRANSLATOR: A TRIBESMAN'S MEMOIR OF DARFUR** (Random House, $23) is full of such indelible atrocities—the raped mother who hangs herself from a tree with her own shawl after watching her children die in the desert; a killing field so vile, where eighty-one innocents were hacked to death by machetes, that members of a BBC camera crew need three days in a medical clinic to recover from seeing it. And yet, miraculously, *The Translator* consecrates as much as it horrifies.

Hari was the schoolboy in a family of herdsmen. Reading *Jane Eyre*, *Treasure Island*, *Oliver Twist*, *Animal Farm*, and *Cry, the Beloved Country* not only added English to his Zaghawa and his Arabic but also equipped him with a novelist's eye, which subsequently got lots of practice in ironic perspective on the road, while he was looking for work in Libya and rotting in prison in Egypt. By the time he came home again, Darfur was burning. Instead of picking up a gun, Hari went into the business of assisting diplomats, NGOs, and journalists cross the border in Land Cruisers to report the genocidal truth. By way of reciprocity, those he assisted—among them Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, Ann Curry of NBC News, and Paul Salopek of *National Geographic*—later helped to save him from execution as a spy, with a boost from the do-good likes of Jimmy Carter, Jesse Jackson, and Bono.

So *The Translator* is partly a valentine to these reporters who did perhaps drink too much but still came "like cowboys . . . to clean up the land," wept at what they witnessed, and could "smell lies just as dogs smell deeply buried bones." And partly an anthropology and geography of an African tragedy, of camels, goats, red salt, and human bones; of a Sahara as big as the United States and, between Sudan and Chad, a Darfur the size of Texas, where 4,000 villages have been destroyed and two and a half million people displaced, where "torture was the popular new thing because Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib were everywhere in the news at that time, and crazy men like this were now getting permission to be crazy." And also an act of mourning—for dead children whose skin is "like delicate brown paper, so wrinkled," and for songbirds stunned out of the trees by gunships, hiding in the folds of Daoud's robes and shawl, then falling down insensible, "their hearts broken by this noise."

In a refugee camp, a healer wrote some helpful passages from the Koran on small wooden tablets. These tablets were then washed so that the inky water could be swallowed by the father whose daughter had died on the bloody bayonet of the janjaweed. I intend no impertinence when I say that some

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Flying Sparrow, by Giovanni da Udine © AKG Images/Electa

secular books—certainly this one—are also a form of Holy Communion.

Not all the books on Earth, in either inky German or watery English, by the father or his children, could save the life of the oldest son of Thomas Mann, who never mastered dad's knack for sublimation. **IN THE SHADOW OF THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN: THE ERIKA AND KLAUS MANN STORY** (Chicago, $27.50) divides its enthrallments evenly between the star-crossed siblings, but Andrea Weiss, who's also made a movie on the subject, can't help choosing sides. And the side she ends up choosing is that of Klaus, super-sensitive and suicidal, instead of Erika, brave, bouncy, and a show-off. Mind you, Klaus probably would not have made it even to age forty-two without Erika's energy and cunning. Still, after the war against Hitler that had sent the whole family into nomadic exile, after a marriage of convenience to W. H. Auden and an adulterous affair with creaky Bruno Walter, Erika chose to devote herself to her celebrated father rather than her loser of a brother. And of Thomas, the Nobel Prize–winning repressed homosexual, six-time father, would-be Goethe, superpatriot, and monster of indifference, Weiss is contemptuous and unforgiving.

Growing up a year apart in Munich, they were children of such bourgeois privilege—with their secret language, private jokes, theater troupe (the Laienbund Deutscher Mimiker), and sexual proclivities (a German youth movement good for nothing other than persuading Erika that she was lesbian and Klaus that he was gay)—that Berlin in 1924, six years into a Weimar Republic of German Expressionism, American jazz, rent boys, and hard drugs, should have been a trampoline. For Erika, it mostly was, straight onto Max Reinhardt's stage. Klaus, however, not only flunked cabaret but had to take his literary lumps as the callow son of a famous father. That brother and sister seemed almost to specialize in sleeping with each other's fiancés raises a suspicion that Weiss doesn't duck: "Although there is no clear evidence of actual sex between the siblings, there are many indications of a psychosexual dynamic in their relationship, which one could call 'emotionally incestuous.'" Which didn't stop them from seeing through the Nazis long before their father did and trying to tell the world about it, while he kept quiet so as not to inhibit the sale of his books.

Sisyphus, by Sir Edward Burne-Jones © The Granger Collection, New York City

The years of exile, war, and America are an extravagance of highbrow gossip, with such raisins in the cake as André Gide, Bertolt Brecht, Sybille Bedford, Jean Cocteau, Stefan Zweig, Muriel Rukeyser, Christopher Isherwood, Janet Flanner, James Baldwin, and Carson McCullers. Erika wrote magazine articles and children's books; Klaus wrote novels, plays, and film scripts; and the two of them collaborated on travel books, all while the FBI and the INS were hot on their trail for "premature anti-Fascism." Poor Klaus, who would at last succeed at suicide, if at nothing else. Weiss wants us to reread such novels as *Mephisto* and *The Volcano* and almost talks me into it. But even in her sympathetic pages, Klaus drags us down. "That tragic twerp," Glenway Wescott unkindly called him. Auden and Chester Kallman joked that his autobiography should have been called "The Subordinate Klaus." What a recipe for suicide: self-pity, death-wishfulness, rough trade, heroin addiction, and writer's block.

We know now that William Styron also spent a lot of helpless time in black depression. **HAVANAS IN CAMELOT: PERSONAL ESSAYS** (Random House, $23) chooses not to, although the late novelist does go on at some length about his prostate gland ("Too Late for Conversion or Prayer") and his penis ("A Case of the Great Pox")—the latter essay a remarkable forty-four pages in which an aging Styron remembers himself as a young Marine recruit, diagnosed with syphilis, having to sit around what was back then called "The Clap Shack," in a bathrobe embroidered with a big yellow "V" for venereal disease, before he'd read Susan Sontag on *Illness as Metaphor* but after he was already acquainted with Albert Camus on *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Styron deciding to amuse us can be scary at first: avuncular is not exactly his default mode; his self-consciousness rumbles like heavy artillery. But for such slicks as *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, for *The Paris Review* and the *New York Times* and a couple of French newspapers, he unlaces his combat boots and wiggles a toe or two. He is nice to Truman Capote, James Baldwin, Terry Southern, and Mark Twain, superficial about movies and censorship, shamefaced about his slave-owning grandfather, and vainglorious about hobnobbing with John Kennedy and François Mitterand—though the hobnob does yield a wonderful anecdote involving Styron, Arthur Miller, Elie Wiesel, and Carlos Fuentes all needing a real celebrity, Melina Mercouri, to get them past a barricade in Paris.

Michael Chabon is more substantive in **MAPS AND LEGENDS: READING AND WRITING ALONG THE BORDERLANDS** (McSweeney's, $24). Readers just catching up to Chabon's novels—gay Gatsby, groves of academe, superhero graphic, boy's book of pilgrimage, neo-Victorian espionage, sci-fi noir—already know that he is fiercely loyal to the child he was and will enjoy his wind-chiming on genre fiction from Poe to Nabokov; "tricksters" from Loki, Coyote, and Krishna to Borges, Calvino, and Pynchon; horror stories by M. R. James, Sherlock Holmes under Conan Doyle's hood; Norse myths, Philip Pullman, John Milton and epic fantasy; Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and Captain Marvel; Howard Chaykin and *Citizen Kane;* Ben Katchor and Julius Knipl; Cormac McCarthy, Will Eisner, and other golems. What is so startling is how much more interesting most of these indulgences are to read about in Chabon's pages than they were on their own, in the pulpy original, as if the nostalgic novelist, like the magician-for-hire in his *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, can make paper roses consumed by fire bloom from a pile of ash. ■