

And Maurice sends out 50,000 watts of woman's laughter, speeded up, a mad shriek, speeded up screaming at us out of the sweet nights of the dark hot savannah of the great gods of transmission, out of the dark rooms of the night.

— LORENZO MILAM

## GREEK STYLE

BY SUZANNE SLESIN, STAFFORD CLIFF, AND DANIEL ROZENSZTROCH, PHOTOGRAPHS BY GILLES DE CHABANEIX, INTRODUCTION BY HARRY MARK PETRAKIS. CLARKSON N. POTTER (CROWN PUBLISHERS); 1988.

GREEK STYLE IS A PECULIAR hybrid of mythology and Edith Hamilton's histories betrayed by the modern, offensive Athenian cabbies, a sooted Acropolis, two-fer Mikonosian sunsets, whitewash, and men always after your mate's cockles (you pick the sex) and cigarettes. The authors missed all this. Missed everybody. In hundreds of color shots of churches, lofts, beaches, doorways, bedrooms, gardens and cafes, there is but one soul: Constantin Frontzos, the mayor of Ioanina. A heart for him.

— MAX DUNSEATH

## I LOVE YOU, LET'S WORK IT OUT

BY DAVID VISCOTT, M.D. POCKET BOOKS; 1987.

DAVID VISCOTT IS PROBABLY the most popular psychiatrist in history. I don't know for sure if more people have read Viscott or Freud, but I'll bet the numbers are close. Freud never made it on the Johnny Carson Show:

JOHNNY: Well, Siggy . . . may I call you Siggy? What shall I call you?

FREUD: You may call me vateffer you like. Vat vould you like to call me?

JOHNNY: Well, Siggy, have you heard the latest psychiatrist joke?

FREUD: As it happens, Chunny, chokes are ze latest seem of my new book, Vit und its Relationship to ze Unconscious, in vich I deal mit der unconscious manifestations of hostility inherent in chokes.

JOHNNY: That's very interesting, Siggy. Actually, I've never read your book. I doubt if anyone in our studio audience has your book. Ed, have you read it? Doc? Anyone in the band? Siggy, looks like you've stumped the band. See, this guy goes to a psychiatrist, and . . .

David Viscott has been on Johnny Carson. He has his own talk show, which is the most popular program on Los Angeles radio. His roman-à-clef, *The Making of a*

*Psychiatrist*, was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection. He markets a line of greeting cards with sensitivity messages. "Though love may fade, herpes is forever." He has his own Viscott Institute.

I knew him when. In high school, he was the Newton High Tiger, leading the cheers at football games from within his tiger suit and tiger mask. Exhibitionism and glamour on the outside; and within? In residency, a few years ahead of me, he advised me to enter psychoanalysis immediately. When I asked why, he explained, "Michael, you cannot imagine the thrill of having someone listen to you, really listen to your every word, for a whole hour every day."

Some sample aphorisms from his current oeuvre:

— *All growth is overcoming doubt.*

— *Shouldn't we be able to find the courage on our own, prod ourselves, and reach for the stars? Of course.*

— *If you haven't committed to yourself, it may explain why committing to another has been such a problem.*

— *Should I commit?*

*Can I commit?*

*Will I commit?* (These are the same questions I ask myself when faced with a psychotic and homicidal patient.)

— *You cannot compromise your own happiness.*

— *The language of the heart must be on the tongue.*

— *One can talk and say nothing.* (You said it, David!)

If you weep to Harlequin romances, enjoy long walks along the beach, like chestnuts roasting on the open fire, take inspiration from Billy Graham, and love yourself above all others, you will enjoy this book. I didn't.

— MICHAEL A. INGALL

## JOHN SANFORD

*A Very Good Land to Fall With  
Scenes From the Life of an American Jew  
Volume 3*

BLACK SPARROW PRESS; 1987.

LOVELY STUFF. I WAS hesitant to take on a book with such a ponderous title (not more agonized humanism!) What's more, I had already done my part to get back to my own roots, and didn't feel the need to find still one more — or a lesser — Henry or Philip Roth, Irving Howe, Isaac Bashevis Singer; Mort Sahl or Abbie Hoffman. But I had faith in the book cover's sans-serif blocky design that gave off whiffs of the world between the Wars. I took comfort in the always-swell Black Sparrow printing and production values: the Press never wastes its resources on the second-rate. I was also encouraged by just how good had been their reprints of work by another Hollywood emigre screenwriter from the 30s, John Fante. Fante was the son of an Italian bricklayer; Sanford (born Julian Shapiro), the pretty nice Jewish boy, comes from a different class, and is the son

of a New York City lawyer largely ruined by the Depression. Sanford does mention running into Fante in this reminiscence of Southern California dreamtime. As it turns out, the books by these two natural writers that the film industry didn't have enough use for turn out to be good company for each other.

It's hard to pull off journal-writing; in other words, make it fit for publication. There are so many offenders who commit the sacred-feces crimes of self-indulgence: these writers assume because they thought it and they wrote it, somebody wants to read it. The Maughams are few and the Sartons are many. Sanford is wonderful at turning his life into readable art, mixing history and politics into the everyday. In the few passages from his novels quoted in *A Very Good Land to Fall With*, true-life commentary seems much more his medium than the fiction he wanted to devote his life to. How rare, how strange a beast he is: artistically a purist, he remained ideologically individualistic and ultimately modest.

Sanford records a texture of L.A. life that has probably all but disappeared, what with the Southland's transformation from a colonial outpost into a cosmopolitan city complete with Thai restaurants and burglar alarms in almost every house. He describes the trees and flowers and qualities of light I remember from my own childhood in Pasadena; he evokes a sense of a place that was just disappearing when I was growing up, a landscape filled with the dusty smell of oleander, of orange groves and wide porch swings (he calls the one in his book a glider, just so) settled under carob trees. This is the true lost heart of Los Angeles. The gentleness here can seldom now be found in the city of the Queen of the Angels. Sanford is a witness to that antebellum (what war? between Nature and strip development?), antediluvian (what flood? of post World-War Two housing tracts?) life. I felt vindicated: somebody else has experienced the city's secret tenderness — and wrote it.

But that's hardly all. As I read the book over a single long weekend, I kept on wondering why I hadn't heard of this guy or seen any of the movies he'd worked on. Sanford writes quiet seductive prose evocative of James Agee's: it sings along to the sound patterns of English but doesn't beg for attention. I never put the book down thinking "All right, John. I know you're dripping with sensitivity but let's get on with the story." Refinement of the senses is always a problem with these interior types (Are you listening Harold Brodsky?) For the gossip-hungry, Sanford had interesting friends (Joan Crawford, Nathanael West) and even more interesting principles: he was reluctant to join the Communist Party because as a writer he "already had a purpose" and questioned whether "the Communists are the only people with humanity" and worried that "their big word is organization." But join he does after a time, because "it's not enough to send chocolate." He pays, of course; he is banned by Washington from working on Allied propaganda films with Frank Capra and William

Wyler, and though this volume of his autobiography extends only as far as the bombing of Hiroshima, there are hints that he will be dragged into the McCarthyite blacklisting and backbiting misery of the 50s.

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Sanford does seem to be on the side of the angels. He has a great relationship with his great dad. Much of the book is devoted to his courtship of and marriage to screenwriter Marguerite Roberts. This is a romance as graceful as any constructed by a late Victorian novelist. He is first taken by the sound of her footsteps on the other side of the closed door of his writer's cell at Paramount Pictures:

*But once or twice each morning you'd hear a pair of high-heeled shoes tapping past in the corridor, a series of steps in perfect rhythm, unhesitant and direct, and as the days went by, you found yourself on the alert for the even pace, the precise percussion, the coming and going of a particular shadow on the glass. You were able to put faces on the hasty, the slovens, the craven slaves, but none of your fancies suit the one who walked with such cadence, and in the end you consulted Joe.*

*"Who went by just now?" you said.*

*"I thought you knew," he said. "You're always listening for her."*

*"She moves with purpose. She's the only one who does that."*

*"Her name is Marguerite Roberts. She's one of the best screenwriters in the business."*

*"What does she look like?"*

*"Next time she comes along," he said, "why not open the door?"*

Marguerite was an expert horsewoman from fine Nebraskan farming stock. Laconic and independent, she and her hardy upright family are a match for Sanford —

*"No one could say you were beautiful," he'd say. "You have the smallest hands and smallest feet, but that's as far as I can go. I look at you, and I say to myself, 'She's quite plain. I like pretty girls, but this one isn't pretty at all.' And then I look again, and wonder, because you aren't plain anymore, and I say 'Why did I think she was plain before? She's beautiful.'"*

True mush. Who could resist being loved like that? And, *Sunlight through the apricot tree vined her with shadows that seemed to bind her to the chair, and you watched her as though she were there on display. Here and elsewhere you'd watched her for a year, always wondering what you were watching for and wondering always whether you'd be able to define it if found. The word "quality" had sometimes come to mind, and now, offering itself again, it seemed to have taken rise in the figure seated in the sun and shade, the "sol y sombra", of an April afternoon. Quality, you thought, but in which of its senses — as a descriptive, for grace, say, or modesty, or as a substantive, a matter of texture, a part*

of the weave?

Finally, they take a trip by train to New York, where Roberts' play "Farewell Performance" is to be produced and Sanford will look for a publisher for his experimental novel *Seventy Times Seven*. Here, The Boy King will finally introduce his shiksa fiancée to the relatives. But before they arrive, there's this, like something out of a Bogart-Bacall movie that should have been produced but never existed:

"Jabez," she said.

And you said, "Yes."

"Do you know that we've been seeing each other for two years?"

"Thanks to Joe March."

"We've been together every day, almost — at my house, at yours, in restaurants, and driving around in a car. We've been on trips to the mountains, the beach, Caliente, Reno, San Francisco. And now we're on our way to New York, and when we get there, we'll be married. Isn't that so?"

"It's so," you said.

"You've never used the word 'love'," she said. "Not in any of those places or at any of those times."

"Does that bother you?"

"Yes," she said. "Some."

"Enough to call the engagement off?"

"Oh, no, not that much. Not nearly."

"How so, if you think I don't care?"

"I never said that. How could you be with me so much and not care? How could you be so good to my people? And, my God, how could you take me to Musso's four hundred times?"

Your laughter caromed off the ceiling. "What're you laughing at up there?"

"The fact that you don't seem to miss the missing word."

At a grade-crossing, a bell rang three times — low, high, low — and it was gone.

"Jabe," she said through the dark, "you're nothing but a crooked lawyer."

You climbed down and leaned into her berth, and you said, "Here's the way I use the word: I hate to see you leave a room."

What a pair, what a pair. He appreciates the delicacy of her ears, for god's sakes. Mothers and followers of Jane Austen and William Thackeray would be pleased — Maggie is endowed with an innate gentility that the intellectual heirs of Matthew Arnold and George Meredith might have devised. As Sanford recognizes her value, you, too, fall in love with him for having the good taste to fall in love with her. Benedick and Beatrice in Filmland, circa 1939.

The whole book captures a dialectic hardly ever dealt with fully: that of the dance between assimilated Jew and Ultra-WASP. We all know about the appeal of the snow princess to the boy from the ghetto (thank god you're nothing like my mother), but there is more to this pairing off than a simple love of blondes with sta-prest breasts. What is the nature of the physiochemical attrac-

tion between certain kinds of Jews, in love with all America (remember Bob Dylan and his homages to Woody Guthrie? Allen Ginsberg's "America"? Mort Sahl's political diatribes in the 60s?), and real Americans.

In linguistics, there is a concept of "marked" and "unmarked", where "marked" denotes the exceptional or unusual, and "unmarked" the standard operating procedure in the language. Here the concept applies to regular Americans, the ethnically unmarked, who find affinity with Jews, the chosen — or marked — people, who are exhilarated by the promise of America. Sanford, for example, wrote four books with titles deriving from a single passage in William Bradford's "History of Plymouth Plantation". He also gave the heroine in his novel "The People From Heaven," about racism and classism in the Adirondacks, the overstated name of "America Smith." The pull between the people who carry the Talmud in their racial memory and the people who actually own family Bibles isn't adequately explained by concepts such as Exotic Other, Incest Taboo, or Attraction of Opposites. Aside from the bond to his perfect wife, it is typical that Sanford befriended internist Gustave Holmgren, a snappish, good-hearted member of L.A.'s most exclusively white-bread assembly, the Jonathan Club.

*A Very Good Land to Fall With* is even subtitled *Scenes From the Life of an American Jew*, and treats the Jewish Question oh so well but oh so obliquely. It got me thinking about an ex-boyfriend whose ancestors on his father's side came over on the Mayflower (on his mother's they came over on The Oregon Trail.) I thought of a Norwegian-Luxembourgeois friend from Wisconsin; of another fellow, a farm boy from Iowa, and of a certain lacrosse-stick-wielding great-grandson of a robber baron. I thought of the fifth-generation native Californian that counts among her forebears a signer of the Declaration of Independence. (She was growing up in the Los Feliz section of Hollywood at the same time I was walking through the mustard fields of Pasadena, and she, too, knows about the Paradise Lost of Old L.A.). The son of a Methodist minister who can trace his family back from Alabama to Switzerland and to Lancashire was reading over my shoulder as I was writing this and took exception. "But you don't understand. WASPs are Anglo-Saxon and so have to be from England," he said. And I said "No they don't. They just have to be generally Northern European and Protestant. And no, I don't think all white people look alike." To prove my point I reminded him that all of his friends were either Jews or Catholics.

And just as I sought out him and others like him, these blue-eyed ones sought out me and others like me, too. Which is a long way of saying that *A Very Good Land to Fall With* gets at the preternatural recognition that Jew-lovers in flight from their mainstream American heritage give to Jews in flight from the shtetl into Enlightenment. Marguerite Azora Smith Roberts, whose father was "mostly Holland Dutch" and whose

mother was "Scotch, Irish, German," met Julian L. Shapiro, of New York, Lithuania, and points east — and everyone was pleased.

A thoughtful young man with a talent for writing, Sanford did go after bright lights and glamour, and did hang out with the rich, famous, or talented in fashionable places to eat — until he knew better. He documented his time in the limelight in the second person, and here the comparison to literary brat-packer Jay McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City*) stops. Sanford's book

is the Real Thing and reading it is not like eating a popsicle. The difference between the two books, one by a guy who was in his thirties in the 30s and the other by a guy who is in his thirties in the 80s, points to what historian Barbara Tuchman called the decline of quality. It delineates the problem more clearly than could any discussion of the pursuit of excellence, the closing of the American mind, or why store-bought tomatoes taste so bad.

— PAULINA BORSOOK

"POLO PONIES IN BOCA RATON" BY PETER BLIND.

