

Plover was angry and didn't know it

Getting Off

By Don Carpenter.

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By RICHARD ELMAN

Plover plays radio in San Francisco. M.C. for a dial-in talk show, he's quick and glib with opinions, but heavy, brooding and shy about his feelings. Your little-better-than-average-male-chauvinist-pig, he is hip enough to drink Dos Equis beer, and tender enough with any woman who is not his wife. Most of his 14 years of marriage have been spent hulking over the TV at night with his bottle of Dos Equis in a San Francisco suburb, but Plover can't allow himself to imagine that Thalia wasn't having a good time. He hulks at the center of Don Carpenter's fourth book, somewhat disoriented and befuddled and angry for having been kicked out of the house, at last, by that somewhat drab female. In the midst of his own subdued melodrama he doesn't know how funny he could be.

Richard Elman's latest novel is "An Education in Blood."

Plover never quite says it, but he somehow manages to believe that Thalia has been ungrateful. Throughout most of the pages of "Getting Off" he goes about as if encased or lacquered inside a brittle, thin-shell of depression which has dulled all his perceptions and feelings so that he cannot experience the hard knot of m.c.p. anger beneath. He smokes dope, but trips nowhere. On a New York vacation from his sympathetic employers he has a love affair with a lady editor that only momentarily distracts him from thoughts of reconciliation with Thalia. One sometimes wonders if Plover wants reconciliation with Thalia so that he will have somewhere to live, somebody to cook for him and do his clothes again. In fact, it is not until he is able to crack through the casein of rage that has congealed around him that Plover becomes a free pigeon once more, able to think about a life for himself—though in order to do so he has had to admit that his anger really exists through a petty brutal act, a slap in the face.

Plover remains entirely self-righteous and condescending. He claims to understand why Thalia needs to go her own way. He doesn't want to cause a fuss, but comes home every so often to have his shirts laundered. Poor sad sack, he has

reserved for himself a limbo of friends' sofas and girl friends, borrowed apartments and motel rooms as if he were atoning with a series of half-hearted shrugs for a sin in which he did not quite believe. All the while he seethes. The only way he will ever get off is to admit to his own rage. But when he does finally, he is nasty, slaps Thalia about, actually believing this could be his ticket home again. Confronted, at last, by his estranged wife's split lip and hurt eyes, it all comes home to Plover that Thalia is every bit as angry as he is. Reconciliation? He needs a divorce. . . .

If a lesser craftsman had taken on the dream trip of unreality and self-pity between separation and divorce, we might have been given polemic or lugubrious rhetorical melodrama; Don Carpenter is careful, disciplined and exacting. He says what he has to say once and simply, moves from scene to scene with the grace of a professional, never boasts or pretends to any more sex or violence than there is in the experience, manages to keep his tone reserved (a kind of perfect correlative for low key depression) and, at the most important moments, dramatizes effectively.

"You know, I never hit her before in all the years we were married," Plover, rueful and drunk, explains

to a cop outside his favorite tavern after he has finally given in to his anger against Thalia and nearly scared her into pressing charges. One sympathizes with all the impotent rage without finding poor Plover any the nicer for it. In the very next scene he returns home to the scene of their actual crime together, and Thalia tells him off for the very first time in their marriage: she just doesn't like him; she has always been afraid of him. *Finis* . . . Plover can be off at last, to budge from his stance of humiliation and disgrace and recognize that if he was not the perfect male, she was hardly the perfect female. Then, and only then, is he able to be free.

"Getting Off" is the kind of novel that one reads (if one has ever been divorced) with gratitude that an author has bothered to set down so much tight, painful stuff so fastidiously; but afterwards one has no real sense of having been guided beyond the specific experience to any richness of illumination. For one thing, Carpenter's prose is so low key and played down that it rarely deals in metaphor; it's simply a scenario for understated psychological depiction. Also, novels such as this have a peculiar tic, a necessity to document at every turn the character's whereabouts, hangouts and buddies on the (Continued on Page 18)

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San Francisco scene, and this literal-mindedness sometimes gets a bit tedious. The author writes only as the character perceives, and, since the character is a little depressed and not too smart, though hip, it's as if one were being conducted through hell by some lesser figure than Dante—for example, the late George Orwell. It probably would be entertaining to know just how much brimstone was consumed per diem, or where to find a good thirst quenching glass of Dos Equis in all that uncomfortable heat, but whether or not that could ever compensate for the ability of a poet to perceive experience as metaphor is debatable.

"Getting Off" is extremely worthwhile to read because we seem to get to know Plover and his ragged friends, have heard him on the radio, or overheard him in bars. We've bumped into poor Thalia, too, once too often with her shopping cart in the supermarket. But Carpenter has done more than simply average out a lot of ordinary people's experience. He has found a way to dramatize that experience, ac-

ording to its true proportions, has taken the pulse, as it were, of a certainly large segment of contemporary butchdom and tweaked its weaknesses and agonies while discovering along the way some occasionally terse middle-aged moments of ecstasy.

From the opening pages in which Plover wakes beside a suddenly unresponsive woman to discover that their married act is finally over, we are with him in his search for new lady friends, apartments, a life style. Carpenter is able to make you believe in some clean, fresh way that smoking too much dope and drinking too many beers is an anodyne for the instantaneous intimacies of Sausalito bars and he can make you feel that slightly fetid wet-wash mood that depressed housewifery can lend to any nice suburban household. He knows his subject and the painful terrain Plover is forced to inhabit, cut loose and adrift long after his prime to gab with besotted buddies and ache for home again. Carpenter stays with his character because he is a writer of integrity, even though this sometimes leads him into stretches of suppressed feeling that for any sensitive reader may pass for mere dullness. ■