

# Books of The Times

By John Leonard

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**LITTLE LIVES.** By John Howland Spyker. 215 pages. Fred Jordan Books/Grosset & Dunlap. \$10.

**L**OOK back over my shoulder at this book, because a masterpiece may be gaining on me. "Little Lives" has already been compared, rather predictably, to Edgar Lee Masters's "Spoon River Anthology" and Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio." Less predictably, it has been mentioned in the same sentence with William Faulkner's "The Hamlet." In other words, "Little Lives" is about rural folk in short takes. In this case, the rural folk abide in Washington County in upstate New York.

They are farmers, bankers, stonecutters, chemists, blacksmiths, swineherds, ministers, prostitutes, schoolteachers, draymen, doctors, farmers, drunks and thieves. John Howland Spyker — and we will be talking about who he is later on — introduces them one-by-one by their quaint names. Each is allowed an anecdote or two, a peculiarity of personal appearance, an eccentricity or an obsession, estranged love and, most of the time, a sad death.

If they have a favorite saying — for instance — "The Mormonite Duck is monogamous" — we are given it. If they are celebrated in a scrap of a poem or a children's song or an odd epitaph on the gravestone, we get that, too. They are, in a way, notations on, or ingredients for, a set of characters about which Mr. Spyker is brooding. He refuses to sum them up, as if that's not his job.

## Old Testament Singsong

The style of all this is a sort of out-back Old Testament singsong that specializes in the dying fall as a punch line, Mark Twain playing with and occasionally fracturing Elizabethan rhythms: "It is not always honestly given, but you will have a better time, nevertheless, if, when a woman loves you, you take that love seriously."

Mr. Spyker by turns is witty, irascible, lugubrious, vain and unseemly. When he reaches for a metaphor, it is almost always to be found in nature rather than a book, although we learn eventually that he considers himself a literary man.

He quotes from the 17th-century diary of Robert Hooke: "Discoursed about Universal Character, about Preadmits and of Creation. About insects. I mentioned all vegetables to be females. I told Wild and Aubrey of flying. Wild cold. Drank port."

Who is Mr. Spyker to be discoursing on the "universal character" he finds in his "Little Lives" so far up the canal from the mythical and iniquitous New York, N.Y.? He seems to be — we feel him to be — old, childless, unmarried, with enough money to sit in his mansion and put down his ironic stories. His family has been in Washington County for generations. He has loved and lost. As we move from, say, Vanessa Wund-

erlich to Budgy Bordelaise, he gets more and more excited, and what excites him is the bizarre.

Here is where "Little Lives" becomes interesting, something more subversive than "Spoon River Anthology" and "Winesburg, Ohio" — which were, I suppose, necessary in order for our literature to graduate from high school, but whose mute, inglorious Miltons are tedious today. "Little Lives" fairly rages with fantasy and passion and a taste for the catastrophic.

What does Mr. Spyker choose to notice and record? The underground traffic in contraceptive sponges and the cocaine in the jars of fruit juice; children who eat worms and children who are murdered; bankruptcy, insanity, suicide and demonic possession; men who lose their arms and legs, or who are trampled by oxen or who fall into vats of fulminate and are dissolved to the bone, or who are steamed to death "like a lobster" in a car wash, or whose skins are fried "to a deep brownish yellow almost like goose grackle" — these, and Semmelweis fever, and Mongoloidism, are what attract his eye when he isn't thinking about sex, which is most of the rest of the time.

Increasingly, as I turned the pages, even when I laughed, I was absorbed by Mr. Spyker. He is his own novel. It is as if the grumpy intelligence of Edmund Wilson in "Upstate" were cohabiting unnaturally with the bleak compulsions of the Michael Lesy in "Wisconsin Death Trip." Add to this amalgam the raging sexuality of an old man Yeats — hoarding his marrow-bones, his day-breaks and candle ends, beginning his war on God — and the bitter irony of Conrad Aiken, who lived out his life pouring martinis on the grave of the parents who betrayed him. Analyze the nasty crack about "the former poet" Richard Eberhart.

## Question of Territory

John Howland Spyker is himself literature: a Charles Kinbote, a Geronimo, a Tiresias. The publisher tells us that Spyker "has published several books of fiction and poetry under another name." Nonsense. He has published more than a dozen books of fiction and poetry under the name of Richard Elman. Those books, when they have been reviewed at all, have usually been reviewed by Ignoramuses.

Mr. Elman has always covered too much territory — the politics of family life, the tribal rites of academe, the human particulars of the holocaust — and reviewers, who cover too little territory, have tended to review his previous books instead of the one they've just read. And so I suppose he was hiding from his own mixed reputation, and dared to let Spyker speak for another self. The wonder is that, as a consequence, Mr. Elman has created a character more plausible and more engrossing than most novelists whose names we know.

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