

THE ICE CATHEDRAL. Fiction by George Leonard. Simon & Schuster. \$14.95

Garlanded with epigraphs from Freud on the social need for individual repression, George Leonard's novel *The Ice Cathedral* seems as convincing thematically as a handbook on contraception stamped with the imprimatur of the Catholic Church.

The Ice Cathedral throws more than its share of violence at us, like handfuls of chum, and a good case might be made for suppressing it.

Mark Kessler, protagonist, is Jewish, a doctor's son. He has chosen the life of a bayman-clammer on Long Island's Great South Bay, and has been disinherited, I'm not sure why. Once his plastic-surgeon father wanted to alter Mark's face, too, compliments of the house, and when he refused, he was no longer the good son. Mark had more rage than a Gelusil pill could help. He felt cut off, and found himself so alone in the marshes one night that he killed a man in self-defense.

Mark won't go to the police for their help in establishing his innocence. How could they ever believe, he reasons, that the fellow was shooting at him with a shotgun from close range and muttering anti-Semitic imprecations? Mark disposes of the corpse with the local sharks. They eat as much as they can before depositing the remaining chunk in the Jones Beach Amphitheater.

The real miracle commences now, with Mark finding his calling. He's a killer, innate as heartburn. So he starts out on a series of savage attacks on all he hates and fears — bikers, his 14-year-old girlfriend's dad and pimp, a couple of obnoxious drunks, a bossy Jewish businessman, detritus. Why? I suspect nobody knows except Leonard, who, according to the book jacket, once was voted one of the "Outstanding Teachers of Western Civ at Yale." He writes fiction as though he surely was — that is, pedantically.

The Ice Cathedral is as polemical as *Jaws*, but nowhere near as successful as popular fiction. Everything is too contrived to make points and shock. It's a pity none or few of Leonard's much-advertised talents have been utilized in accomplishing that.

There's a nice sense of place imparted through representations of Long Island's South Shore marshes and dunes, and Leonard does have a convincing knowledge of all the lethal weaponry a bayman carries.

But when someone sets out to depict how innately murderous all we humans are, he should probably choose a different genre than the novel, which has always been a basically melioristic enterprise, largely concerned with dramatizing human interaction. Sophomoric writers such as Leonard would probably do better philosophizing.

Reviewed by Richard Elman, the author of "The Menu Cypher" and other novels. His latest collection of stories, "The Derma and the Doctor," is published by Mittelshmerz (Verona, Italy).