

West of The Rockies

By Daniel Fuchs.
166 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$5.95.

By RICHARD ELMAN

The troubles that beset Daniel Fuchs's first novel in more than 30 years afflict his cast of Hollywood characters as well: at a spartanly posh Palm Springs desert resort they come not just singly but in pairs to bully or cajole aging film star Adele Hogue to return to the set of that multimillion picture from which she has just bolted so irresponsibly, or perhaps to ogle at her from the sidelines, all the well-fed wives and their barking executive husbands, the agents, the grifters, the hangers-on, her distraught producer, her former gangster lover, his divorced, though not estranged, wife; and, in fact, they come (or, rather, come on to her) hard and blunt, always paired with adverbs and adjectives intended, I presume, to depict states of their nonbeing, or half-being, or being uptight to which they have all been yolked by Fuchs's vision but which, unfortunately, bully the life out of "West of the Rockies."

Fuchs warns his readers away from experience like a father telling his son not to hang around with fast girls. If he has ever lived, he's not telling anybody about that here. Almost every page of his otherwise flat and literal-minded prose is rigged up to (or with) a certain rigid, numbing sense of fury, a seeming Talmudic exactitude of take and stance toward his characters which doesn't always come off because it seems to serve chiefly to keep the characters at some further distance from themselves, and us, or because, to be more precise, the emptiness about which Fuchs seems to be writing doesn't need to be modified; nor can its sterilities be given any finer shadings. They must simply be avoided.

It's as if, after all those years in the fleshpots this successful screen writer, an Academy Award winner (who could describe his three Brooklyn novels of the thirties, when they were republished in the sixties, as "failures" merely to acknowledge their lack of sales) had sat down to depict his later experience also as sour grapes. He does this with his teeth clenched and his eyes pinched half shut, or with a bandage of adjectives and adverbs around any noun or verb that might lead him by association into intuiting or remembering something—that seepage of felt

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

life, for example, that animates even the most squalid situations.

From this uptight, upright moralizing fury (to use that favorite formation of Fuchs's) his prose is reduced to what it describes, a set of "raw unmanageable grievances," and his characterizations to acts of "festering, senseless belligerence." When, in one brief instant, he seizes on Adele as archetype to lament the sad deaths and degradations of Hollywood's most treasured female commodities, Fuchs sounds a bit like a survivor gloating over the corpses.

"West of the Rockies" is, in fact, both self-righteous and nostalgic, a survivor's fable about the marriage of convenience between two characters on the ropes: Hogue, through whom a good deal of the action is seen, and her sometime stud-agent Claris. It deals in inevitabilities, though what is really much too inevitable is that highly adjectival prose. It's about victims and the sort of half-ironic gallantries of the loser, I suspect; so little is seen and known through Claris that I had to read this novel over twice to comprehend its misleading jacket copy about Claris's act of decency in the end. Its tone is dour, disapproving.

Through Claris we see Hogue as having "doctored, golliwog eyes," and a "high insistent coloring." We hardly see Claris at all, though we are told he is an ex-professional athlete going to seed. And, again, if Hogue ever sees or feels her own beslipped self it is with that "kind of angry detached impatience" which is merely Fuchs as Claris going through his paces as moralizer and deglamorizer.

A pretty frustrating course about frustration and despair—routine, peppery, somewhat hackneyed, I'm afraid. The grifter Claris speaks in a "flat idle tone" and contends with a "nutty-putty ball of despair." Characters are "masked and conspicuous... bogged down and blocked"; their actions are said to be "hideously slipperiness and indefinable." We learn of the "sloth, the waste, and inertia, the shameful seepage of will," or the "guilt and despair" (stuff of so many previous Hollywood novels) without any fresh illuminations about the experience of Hogue or Claris or their panic. Never once letting go long enough to let anybody in this novel really come alive, except for one minor character, the hotel-keeping wife of the gangster, Fuchs has sentenced himself and his readers to all these lifeless adjectives and adverbs.

What was that powerful Hollywood seduction here so acidulously avoided? Money? Women? Fame? Maybe Fuchs was afraid of another 30-year stretch among the sirens when he sat down to write again. But what kept him going so long? How did he ever get off? He clings so fervently to his fine knack for self-punishment that I wondered if his failure to elicit my feelings meant he was not (Continued on Page 10)

Celebrated author keels over not withered. ■

West Of the Rockies

Continued from Page 7

in touch with his own.

Hollywood as the union of the gangster, businessman, con man and artist contained the seeds of its own destruction, yes, and all manner of self-destructiveness. It has been written about before. Did we need a ghost sprung from the grave to tell us this again? But that this was on Fuchs's mind is shown again in his final paragraphs which provide such complete closure to the preceding events that one feels one has left the realm of the fictive almost entirely for a sermon: "all this in a time already gone by, the events recounted here...when television was entirely new and the big picture studios still throbbed, the collapse yet to come, the people enmeshed in their concerns...pursuits, dreams and diversions...."

All this, in fact, after the archetypical sterilities of the Palm Springs desert, after much Old Testament wrath, after "eyes wild and strained," a performer "overtaxed, teetering, bathed in sweat," a misery of faces "fleeting and stern," that "gross bullyboy show of muscle" and the "over-

bearing pugnacious manner" is sort of like the homily delivered by the man who has just left a prostitute's room to the other horny fellows in the waiting room.

Perhaps after all the Doris Day movies, that Academy Award, too, and his adaptation of his masterpiece "Low Company" into an interesting but unsuccessful B picture, "The Gangster," Fuchs really wanted to register this *mea culpa* in the form of a complaint. If so, it doesn't jibe with what he said in the introduction to those republished Brooklyn novels when he spoke of Hollywood writers being "engaged here on the same problems that perplex writers everywhere. We grapple with the daily mystery. We struggle with form, with chimera...."

I think I'd like to believe he meant what he said then and was simply unable to carry it off now when he sat down once more to write fiction. I wish he would try again with all the very real talent that he can summon, all that exertion of imagination and mind and feeling he has shown here only in glimpses, because I truly do believe that any man who has been there and come back again should have something more to report on than the void, and that even if he doesn't he shouldn't warn other people away from taking the trip. ■