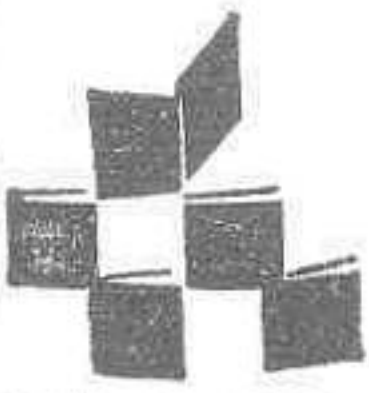

books

IN GOD WE TRUST: ALL OTHERS PAY CASH

A novel by Jean Shepherd. Doubleday, $4.50.

by Ross Wetzsteon

Relax, gang, this isn't a novel after all. Or at least not a Novel novel, modern marriage in crisis of sexual identity, or ruthless power struggles at WOR, or the world as seen through the eyes of a cow, or a disturbing parable set on the borderline between religious ecstasy and sexual perversion. It's just old Shep (as those who've listened will understand, the familiarity is much less affected than "Shepherd" would be, but I remember the annoyance of hearing "Ike" all through the '50s and apologize to those who object)—it's just old Shep telling a series of loosely related stories, each close to 45 minutes long, about childhood back in northern Indiana. (There's a series of linking chapters, each a page or two long, but you don't have to bother reading them—he didn't bother writing them.)

In a way, then, the book is The Best of Jean Shepherd, as if he just went through all his old tapes, picked out the funniest 15, and handed them to a typist. Far from objecting, I'm grateful—Shep's always laughing at those who write in asking him to stop "going philosophical," but I'd rather have that than Shep "going aesthetic." In a sentence: if you like Shep's radio program, you'll like the book even more; if *not*, you won't.

He Made It Up?

A few interesting things happen to Shep's stories on their way into print. In the first place, that disclaimer of "resemblances" at the beginning—and the way he calls himself "Ralph" throughout the book (Flick and Schwartz and all the others keep their "right" names). It's the same kind of reaction we feel when he refers to himself as "a comic." Strangely enough, rather than increasing our admiration for his "imagination," this disappoints us in his truthfulness. After all these years convincing us that these people really lived, that these things really happened, now he says he made it up? He's just an entertainer?

Telephone Performer

Why get upset about it? Just because he's too successful? But the privacy of our response to his stories (which he's also spent years convincing us of, with his constant reference to the smallness and intimacy of his audience), makes his stories seem like both confessions and dialogues—in both of which honesty is more or less assumed. And since nostalgic self-recognition and shared intimacy are at the core of this response, for him to deny the literal truth of his stories is almost to deny our own past. No matter how "imaginatively" he's done it, if he's just made it all up, he's manipulated our lives, betrayed our confidence. How would you like it if you hired somebody to write your biography and he turned it into a novel? Or to put it another way: Shep isn't so much a radio performer as a telephone performer—and wouldn't you be disturbed if you listened to a friend on the telephone for 45 minutes and suddenly heard: "this is a recording"? One of Shep's most remarkable achievements is this

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intimacy with his audience—which may explain why I, for one, don't really enjoy his Limelight performances, why I found myself listening to his voice read this book aloud, and why I concluded, finally, that he was lying when he said he was lying.

Another odd effect of the printed word is to throw his rhythm off slightly. The big build-up works better on radio. When he says: "well—let—me—tell—you—when — that — firecracker—went off—" the rhythm isn't in the words but in the voice. The same thing happens to his hyperbole: "We must have sat there 47 hours" just doesn't read as well as he can make it sound.

But these are minor points, of course, and instead of going on with a systematic "review" of his book, I'd like to concentrate on three specific things at greater length: nostalgia, cynicism, and satire.

Shep's nostalgia is close to Nabokov's, not a sorrowing but an ecstatic nostalgia, so that experience is not re-lived in, but actually heightened by memory. It would probably be safe to say that both of them actually prefer nostalgia to experience—and, in a way, impatiently await the end of an experience so that they can recall it. No matter how psychologically devious this might be, it is certainly aesthetically valuable—for it allows each of them, in differing degrees of course, to give a glow, a nimbus to their reminiscences that elevates them from history to art.

Uber—Reality

Perhaps Shep's audience is so large because he gives us a nostalgic picture of a time when life was "simpler" (with no such "problems" as civil rights or Vietnam), or perhaps because we're particularly nostalgic about the Depression (the first nationwide "happening"). But despite Shep's constant insistence on the uber-reality of life in northern Indiana in the '30s, where Life was Total and Complete (it would be interesting to hear from a Gary, Indiana, Negro laborer about that), the odd thing is, he isn't nostalgic for "reality" but for fantasy. What are the objects of his nostalgia? To a surprising extent, they're radio programs and movies and comic-strips, Red Ryder and Screenland and Little Orphan Annie, the magic world of MGM and Boy's Life and cereal boxes—a time before he "saw through" the fantasy world of a child.

One of his most ecstatic memories is of the Chicago World's Fair: "Mile after mile was covered with this fantasy, this wonderland, this land of real, genuine absolute Magic." (We ought to keep that sentence in mind when he talks about "real" as opposed to "fantasy.") The fact that he is nostalgic not for a lost "reality" but for a lost "wonderland"—for innocence, in short—explains how he can refer, in the early pages of this book, to "my own despised hometown." It's really a rather shocking phrase to one who's listened to Shep for years. Despised? And without any irony? But it's the phrase of a solipsist—he despises the town and loves the "Magic"—and his constant theme of "loneliness" takes on a new and more touching dimension.

Sense of Loss

It would be easy to respond to this that we all feel this way (certainly everyone, for instance, has noticed himself wishing an experience would end so he could begin cherishing it), that nothing is so common as nostalgia for something that never really existed, and that "the sense of loss" is inseparable from the sense of being alive. But doesn't this very universality argue that Shep is more than a mere performer, that he's exposing some real nerve-ends? That he obviously isn't "conscious" of this (in the sense of analyzing, deciding, utilizing, and so on) means nothing—or if it means anything,

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means that, like Chaplin, his very "unconsciousness" is one of his most valuable assets.

This account of his nostalgia may help explain the particular qualities of his cynicism. In a way, this cynicism, like that of a New York newspaper columnist, or even Malcolm Muggeridge, is just a defense against involvement, a way of avoiding any commitment whatsoever by "seeing through" all possible commitments. (Shep's admiration for "Mondo Cane" is rather revealing—if nothing is serious, if everything is a fraud, then there's no possibility of defeat.) The country boy in the city, having listened well to the story of the country cousin, reverses the story simply by refusing to be conned by ANYthing.

Beady-Eyed Fervor

But not being conned, in Shep's case, goes even further. He isn't even going to listen. He's never going to be cynical about, say, the Kennedy assassination—if he ever talked about it at all, he'd probably mention only "the nutty obsessions of these conspiracy thinkers"—NOT from fear of alienating part of his audience, but from an almost knee-jerk reluctance to expose himself to the vulnerability of commitment. Shep often talks about 'commitment'—protesting too much?—as if it involves only beady-eyed madmen possessed by messianic fervor, and defends himself by saying that all we want is for him to adopt our own favorite commitments. But his own messianic fervor, it seems to me, is to live in a world where commitment isn't even possible—the world of a child—let mom and dad worry about that, I'm having fun. Instead of being cynical about November 22, he's cynical about Santa Claus—a cynicism without consequences.

(This probably sounds like a psychologizing put-down. As for psychologizing, it's easy enough to ask in reply: who talks about his life, especially his childhood, for 45 minutes every night, Monday through Friday? And as for put-down, on the contrary, a great deal of my admiration for Shep stems from the fascination of listening to someone so closely in touch with—hold on—"infantile fantasies." One of the functions of art, after all, is to ease our access to ourselves, and my objection to Shep's work to date isn't that he's a "mere comic" but that he won't allow himself the full potentialities of his access. More about that later.)

Kid Never Conned

To illustrate the relationship between his nostalgia and his cynicism: if he were ever to describe a performance of "Peter Pan" at Warren G. Harding School, he'd more likely than not recall the audience yelling back "yesssssss!" when Peter Pan asks if he should free Tinker Bell. Well, I clearly remember the chorus of "nnnoooo!" and Montana isn't that far from Indiana. So it's perfectly conceivable that he would alter reality, after all, if it served either his cynicism or his nostalgia. And the two are related in that both allow him to "see through" (or to not "see through") without any real commitment. Santa Claus: should I believe or not? Peter Pan: should I say yes or no? It doesn't matter either way, which is precisely the point. Life really was simpler. A kid may have fantasies but he's never conned. And never being conned means never growing up. Or surviving at the expense of living. Or nostalgia for uncommitted cynicism.

All this implies the next: the claim on the jacket that Shep is an "underground satirist" is simply preposterous. Shep is as satirical as Norman Rockwell. (The Chicago News: " . . . how comfortable . . . it is to slip into the world of Jean Shepherd.") The very function of his cynicism is to protect and confirm. He doesn't satirize, he eulogizes.

It's always seemed to me that Chaplin (to give a parallel example), far from being an "outsider," mocking our society's values, is actually so popular precisely because he confirms those values. Much of his comedy has its source in his hopeless imitations (hopeless just because they're so Platonically perfect) of what we all do as a matter of routine. (When he cleans his fingernails with his cane, for instance, he isn't satirizing our cult of cleanliness but approving it—by attempting to be even more fastidious than we are.) If the Tramp desires so fervently, so pathetically, to emulate our lives—well, we must be doing something right. And in much the same way, Shep confirms many of the emotions of preadolescence.

Shaw once said of himself and Mark Twain that they had to make people laugh—"if we didn't, they'd hang us instead." Picking at wounds under the pretense of tickling them. But Shep doesn't come near any wounds. I suppose the title of his book sounds like satire, but two things are of interest here: in the first place, the title comes from a sign he saw in a bar, and any real satirist would be satirizing (rather than embracing) the kind of society which has signs like that in its bars; and secondly, the title reminds one of a Twain comment: when Andrew Carnegie told him that the United States was a Christian country, Twain replied: "so is Hell." You won't find that in any bar. Or in Shep either.

'Rotten to Core'

Shep has an almost systematic way of dealing with anything dark or evil in life. He doesn't just ignore or omit darkness and evil; he admits it in such a way that it can be simultaneously denied—a remarkably transparent instance of one of Freud's most brilliant insights.

Basically, his method is to immediately call himself "rotten to the core" and then to gradually cleanse himself. (In a way, this is a variation on his major theme: "trauma can be fun." Remember the Depression, the army?—weren't those days horrible?—but weren't they wonderful? Cf. a passage in this book: " . . . striking terror into the very marrow of the bones of those fortunate enough to be on the scene.")

One of his methods of "handling" the evil he admits is by immediately forcing our complicity: his almost compulsive use of phrases like "you know how it was" or "there's not a guy in this room who didn't" and so on, is a little suspicious. Another method is self-denying hyperbole: references to Freud or psychiatry, for instance, are always expressed in words like "lurking," a demonic "heh heh heh" in the background, so that while confessing something he simultaneously doesn't take it seriously.

But these are subsidiary methods—to understand the basic method, let's take a look at a couple of specific passages at greater length: "The basic, primal elements of existence are laid bare and raw," Shep writes, " . . . that beady, red-eyed, clawed creature, that ravening carnivore, that incorrigibly wild, insane, scurrying little beast—the Killer that is in each one of us." Shep goes on to say that we "rarely admit" this, and even confesses that "I have been attempting to cover it up all of my life." So the denial becomes an admission. But almost immediately the process is reversed: the admission becomes a denial. Because what is he talking about? After all this buildup, what is this dark and evil situation?— the day he fought back to a bully! So we can all say "whew" about that "killer that is in each one of us." And it turns out that he really has been "attempting to cover it up" all this life—it's remarkable how often people will tell the truth when they think we'll think they're telling a lie.

Bullies or Killers ?

Shep also writes, in this chapter: "He daily does battle with horrors and emotions that he will spend the rest of his life trying to forget or suppress. Or recapture." That's as far as he goes But it's much farther than a "mere comic" would go—those last two words—and calling himself an "entertainer" is a way of drawing back from the implications of that passage, of allowing himself not to follow up its hints. For the next step, it would seem, would be to realize that what is "suppressed" and what is "recaptured" aren't the same thing at all—that in "recapturing" bullies he's "suppressing" killers. Hyperbole is often the exaggeration of minor problems so that they can bear the emotional weight of major problems that can't be admitted.

In another of these stories—and it should be said somewhere that these stories are all very very funny and whatever else the publisher wants to put on the jacket of the next edition—after all, a kid has to hustle his book. But in another of these stories, he talks for a couple of pages about "the taste of Pornography," and works up an effective sickly-sweaty image of a child's first contact with illicit sexuality, a kind of naive but disturbing debauchery. In his vague, generalized way, it's quite accurate as to emotions. But what about the factual causes? Primal Scene? Accidental Masturbation? Or even Playing Doctor? Uh-uh—as a kid he stumbled across Boccaccio. And what's the point of the story? He didn't understand it! He thinks "cuckold" is a bird! The confession of debauchery is denied the moment it's made—he's given us those sickly-sweaty emotions of debauchery, then immediately made it clear that he is, in reality, immaculately innocent!

Close to Home

So much for his exposure of the underside of life—so much for "underground satire." Shep is not on WOR for nothing. (A couple of days ago he said: "but we're getting a little too close to home"—and changed the subject.)

Take the last dozen or so paragraphs, change about three words, and you might have a parody of an elaborately over-serious and convoluted analysis of a "mere entertainer"—one of those things about "tragic comedians" that was so fashionable four or five years ago. But my point is to show that Shep CAN be taken that seriously, that there ARE convolutions in his work, that when you get under the first layer of "comic," the second layer of "storyteller," you're in the presence of an awesome and surprisingly complex talent, who, in an entirely unintended way, uncovers a lot of seething emotions.

Many people just compare him to "Mad" and say he's a high-school fad. Others say he's anti-intellectual (maybe that's a little strong, but when he ridicules "Virginia Woolf" because it isn't like the fights he remembers back home in Indiana, you want to remind him that most of us have stopped evaluating art on the basis of what our mothers were like).

My objection, on the other hand, is that every time he opens an access to something important he turns the other way (where is the actual experience of childhood debauchery that caused those disturbing sexual emotions, for instance—it wasn't just reading Boccaccio); that he gets very "close to home" and then changes the subject; and that he's keeping his talent too much under control—an odd thing to say about someone who pours out volumes of talk every week. But maybe that's the point. Imagine WOR as a psychiatrist's couch for just a second—there's Shep—*free associating* for 45 minutes—and you—you're this doctor—and what's the first thing you realize? Shep's not talking to you at all—he's On!

Cold Forgotten

In one of the last of these stories, Shep writes about a Thanksgiving Day Parade—he's in this band—they're freezing—icicles are hanging from their nostrils—they're miserable. But they approach the reviewing stand—and "suddenly the cold was forgotten. We were On." Jean Shepherd—The Kid Who Came In From The Cold.

I don't in any way mean these remarks to measure Shep's "failture"—on the contrary, I hope they're taken as a measure of his potential. But he's got to go back out into the cold again, or he'll spend the rest of his career as an **"I'm only kidding** folks" comic—one of the best, when he could be one of the greatest.

That he knows it's cold outside, that he just might be tempted to step out and see, is hinted at in the final pages. If you've listened to Shep for any length of time—if you still think he's just an "entertainer"—read the following and see if you haven't become more involved with his characters than you'd realized: "We both knew that Schwartz had been shot down over Italy," Shep writes. "They never found him."