

The Past Is Golden

By Dr. Kenneth Martin

Loyal followers of Jean Shepherd ought not to be deceived by the appearance of a "novel" by their hero. **In God We Trust** is really a collection of some of Shepherd's best anecdotes. A few of these stories have appeared before in **Playboy**. All seem to have been edited from tapes of his radio program.

Shepherd broadcasts nightly over WOR, New York. He performs alone, evidently without much of a format. During his broadcasts, which are usually loud, disorganized, and very funny, Shepherd talks freely about whatever he pleases, frequently zeroing in on things or people who are bothering him. Happily, these things and people are the ones that are bothering quite a few others also; people who, except for Shepherd, would have nobody to go on the air in their defense. Shepherd has built up a devoted audience because he is not only reasonable but hip. He makes his listeners feel, perhaps rightly, that they are members of a nocturnal minority, those who really know how it is but can't do anything about it. He is probably considered a loudmouth by thousands of solid citizens.

One of Shepherd's best devices is to illustrate his points by relating incredibly detailed accounts of boyhood experiences. **In God We Trust** contains fifteen of these reminiscences, almost all of which are funny and full of the kid type lore that nobody forgets: things like faked book reports, blind dates, and Christmas anticipation.

Shepherd's enthusiasm and his penchant for detail are among the best qualities of the book. It strikes me that the latter quality is perhaps a major reason why these stories got published. They are good, but a few years ago they would have found a limited audience. Now, however, with all the fascination with trivia, camp, and tawdry nostalgia, Shepherd is more or less fashionable. For years, on the radio, he has been enjoying and exalting the very crackerjack boxes and comic book heroes that are so much in vogue at the moment. He's entitled to a share of the take. Shepherd no doubt feels that the experiences of kids, who are constantly at the mercy of unsympathetic adults, are dress rehearsals for future disappointments and crises. Beneath the surface humor of his stories are situations which could involve any kid at any time. Nonetheless, most readers will probably not take the book too seriously as message literature. Anyone can appreciate **In God We Trust** for its obvious humor. That is enough.

Public taste notwithstanding, it is surprising that the book is enjoying considerable success. Those who are Jean Shepherd followers, or were kids at least

twenty-five years ago, can enjoy themselves. But a great deal of the book's appeal depends upon one's interest in the teller or the memories he invokes. If the reader has never heard Shepherd himself delivering one of these stories, much of the book's effectiveness may be lost. Readers who fail to see boyhood, as Shepherd does, as the hilarious school of hard knocks and small crises, might be less impressed than this reviewer. Even Shepherd from time to time justifies his fascination with his boyhood by pointing to morals or making comparisons with today's world problems I suspect, though, that he simply enjoys talking about being a kid. It is difficult to admit that we still like the same junk we did when we were eight or nine, so Shepherd flatters us by showing how smart people like Little Orphan Annie really are.

In any case, the book is unusual in that it tells about childhood from the kids' point of view. Usually authors have a good time chuckling condescendingly at the immature foibles of children (**Penrod** is an example). This time the situation is different. I look forward to reading these stories again. That's how it was, all right.