

sleek. "It is crucial," Kovel writes, "to face up to the state, to see how its bureaucracy embraces psychiatry and deadens it; to recognize its function on behalf of capital; and, of greatest importance, to struggle against it until it

makes good on the promise of democracy it would like to forget." I agree, but I'm outside the citadel. Inside, Joel Kovel will no doubt remain what he has been and is—a brilliant, permanent misfit. □

The Old Mysteries

SOL YURICK

LIFE ITSELF: Its Origin and Nature. By Francis Crick. Simon and Schuster. 192 pp. \$12.95.

With Robert Jastrow rallying the cosmologists around God, Carl Sagan throwing messages into outer space, the philosophical physicists wielding the Anthropic Principle and Francis Crick sperm-seeding the planets from a Higher Civilization, who needs the Creationists? Directed Panspermia indeed. Are we in the presence of a scientific breakthrough, or has Crick reverted to a hidden strain that haunts modern science: the rebirth of the Old Mysteries with a little expensive high-tech thrown in, the Gnostic-Cabalistic-Pythagorean mysteries run off on a computer?

Crick seeks to account for the origins of life. He comes up with less than a hypothesis, but more than a myth. He trots out for us a "Higher and Unimaginably Advanced Civilization" (HUAC) on another planet, maybe in another galaxy. Perhaps facing a cri-

Sol Yurick is the author of The Bag and The Warriors. His most recent novel, Richard A., is forthcoming from Arbor House.

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sis (a depression, endless inflation, a poisoned environment, *Gotterdammerungen* of one sort or another), the citizens of the HUAC seek to propagate themselves. But the great reaches of space are untraversable by human beings. Unsure (as we are not sure) that there are other life-compatible planets, the HUAC folks send out space ships bearing hardy, space-colonizing bacteria to seed the universe. Among other places, these bacteria reach earth. Obviously. Look around you. The cycle starts all over again.

Crick tells us that the cycle of evolution is an inexorable given. It is inferred from our own anthology of geological strata. If you plant primitive, mutating, recombining protein, it must lead to human life. This conclusion rests on the notion that all life forms are related and are made from the same building blocks: acids, bases, enzymes and nucleotides. The genetic matter in human beings is structured into a double helix (reminiscent, don't you see, of the winged caduceus, two snakes twining a staff), for which discovery Crick got his Nobel Prize.

The method of inquiry Crick and others use goes something like this: We are here. How did we get here? Are we unique? Their form of scientific reasoning always requires repetition and redundancy, and cannot deal with the privileged status of any one event, form or being. For this reason, an accidental and one-time-only combination of elements in a primal soup on *one* planet in *one* solar system in *one* galaxy is unacceptable to scientists. If we have privileged status, we sail too close to God and Creationism.

The elements that go into the modern scientist's vision of life's origins consist of (1) the Big Bang explosion from a dimensionless point with infinite mass, (2) the expanding universe, (3) the cooling and coalescing of the primal plasma into galaxies, stars, planets, (4) a plenitude of galactic forms, including many hospitable solar systems like our

own (although there is no evidence that there are any other planets anywhere else) and (5) the ascendant and evolving path that protein takes, guided by the informative gene, combining, recombining, mutating. Crick and others use these basic elements to begin what is, in fact, a sort of logical-scholastic search, not so much of the evidence but of their collective unconscious.

The universe, we are told, is some twelve and one half billion years old. Our own evolutionary path has taken us about four and a half billion years. Given the principle of plenitude, redundancy (or Abounding Grace), there is room in this schema for not one but *two*, maybe two and a half, evolutionary ascents. Crick, the cosmologists and the deterministic evolutionists throw billions of years around with ease; they convert energy into space, space into numbers, fold it, puncture it with white and black holes; they dilate or contract time, predict and retrodict, model on their computers, which crunch the unimaginable numbers for them with ease. But if they can play these games, why can't one accept the Creationist God, who did it all from His dimensionless spore with infinite energy and time and matter at His disposal?

To arrive at the macro and micro ends of things, where the numbers, particles and forces are unimaginably large or small, science has proceeded by drawing a series of analogues from an extremely limited series of observations. Was there a Big Bang? And thus an expanding, evolving universe? And thus the path of evolution? The Big Bang theory arises from evidence of the Red Shift (shall we gain some political hope here?); all things in the universe recede from one another at a certain rate of speed. The expanding universe is reinforced by background microwave radiation left over from that primal event. Eons of time are inferred from a very few years of observation. But the Red Shift and the background radiation are open to question; contradictory evidence has arisen. Fundamental atomic particle theory is in trouble. In fact, *every* theoretical construct of basic science is in deep, deep trouble. Do we retrodict, retro-calculate to beginnings in order to come up with something that rationalizes the present? And if so, Crick's elaborate panspermatic notion comes crashing down.

I have never read a book so full of hesitating and qualifying words, so

many *uncertains, mays, may not haves, not yet documented*s (how do you document unimaginable forces and eons of time other than by analogy?), *mights, possibly, strongly suspected*s . . . Clearly, Crick is uncomfortable about his whole notion. Are we in the presence of the sky gods impregnating the earth gods once again? The cosmogonic egg?

Crick insists that his theory is neither myth nor science fiction:

The plain fact is that the myths of yesterday, which our forebears regarded not as myths, but as the living truths have collapsed, and while we are uncertain whether we can successfully use any of the remaining fragments, they are too rickety to stand as an organized body of beliefs.

But he proceeds to use these fragments of another old True Religion.

Certain aspects of faith were seemingly defeated in the war between Science and Religion. But an underground tradition of hermetic wisdom, gnosis and cabala survived and seeped into modern mathematics, logic, theoretical science and information theory. Descartes was a God-loving Rosicrucian. Newton was *first* an alchemist and astrologer and *then* a scientist. Can we take his calculations out of context? Leibniz was obsessed with yin-yang (binary logic) and the *I Ching*. And so it went.

Gnostic-cabalistic thought holds with the notion that the universe is a function of secret knowledge. "In the beginning was the word and the word was made flesh," says that most gnostic of the Gospels, John's. In the beginning was the genetic "word," which makes the flesh, say the geneticists. The body is merely the container, the relay, for endlessly transmitting the genetic message. When you mistake information games for reality, you're in trouble.

Why do scientists like Crick write such silly books? What's at stake? Money, power, funding, research grants, equipment (space probes and radio telescopes), prestige, the restoration of design, order and hierarchy into a capital-disordered universe.

One day, perhaps soon, we are going to make contact with the citizens of HUAC. And when we do, we are going to find that their signals are being broadcast from the same old places—from Citicorp, from Chase Manhattan Bank, from I.B.M., from A.T.&T., from the more mystic reaches of the international intelligence community. We

will find that these Laputans, these Merchants of Light, have reflected their messages to us from mirrors planted in the minds of the Sagans, the Dickes, the Clarkes, the Jastrows and the Cricks.

Perhaps Crick could be persuaded to exchange his Nobel Prize for a ceremonial magician's hat: he already has the two-snaked staff. □

THEATER.

RICHARD GILMAN

Grownups

One of the critic's most difficult tasks is to try to overturn the prevailing view that a particular piece of work is comic or, for that matter, tragic. I remember Walter Kerr attempting to demonstrate that Ionesco wasn't a funny writer by quoting passages from one of his plays. They were hilarious. I remember too a Charles Addams cartoon that shows the interior of a theater filled with people displaying grief-stricken expressions. And then—the eye discovers it after a while in the middle of a row—there's a single face with a wide, delighted grin.

With the emotions reversed, mine is that face vis-à-vis Jules Feiffer's *Grownups*. But my tears in the midst of others' laughter have nothing to do with misreading a comedy as a tragedy; they spring from renewed despair about our theater and our critics. For I think the acclaim for *Grownups* has been largely imposed from above, drummed up in the media without much evidence of popular approval. The night I attended the play, the audience didn't laugh all that often, and then only dutifully; the enthusiasm was all in the reviews, blown up and displayed on the theater's facade. (That the play is having problems at the box office would seem to support my theory.)

Now, as I've said, to establish in the face of the rave notices—"savagely funny"; "makes laughter an adventure"; "ferocious farce"; "you'll laugh yourself silly"—that *Grownups* isn't funny, and is in fact a wretched piece of theater in every respect, is exceedingly difficult. But someone must try.

Feiffer's play centers on the relationship of a thirtyish couple to each other and to the man's parents, and is presumably about self-discovery within marriage and within the parent-child

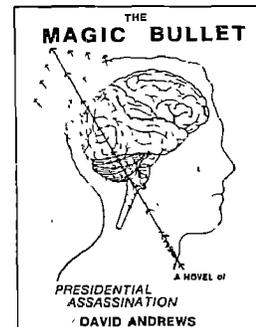
connection. Though there are no last names and the given ones are neutral—Helen, Jack, Louise, etc.—there's no mistaking the play's psychic, social and literary ground: Jewish households are the arena, and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is the artistic model.

From the opening scene in a *House and Garden* kitchen in New Rochelle, the play introduces every cliché of Jewish domestic reality, and no doubt of Protestant or Catholic domestic reality as well. My quarrel here is with the lack of originality, whatever the milieu. The best definition of a cliché I know is that it's a *no longer useful truth*, yet *Grownups* and its typical journalistic admirers mistake clichés of this sort for animate wisdom.

Is it useful to the imagination to encounter once again mothers who treat their 35-year-old sons as if they were 10, fathers who fret about their married daughters being out after dark and whose sons tell them that "we've never had a conversation in our lives," parents whose concern for their grown children is fixed on the latter's economic status? Can we really be enlivened by mothers who sniff at the housekeeping capabilities of their daughters-in-law? Is it diverting to hear an adult say of a

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