

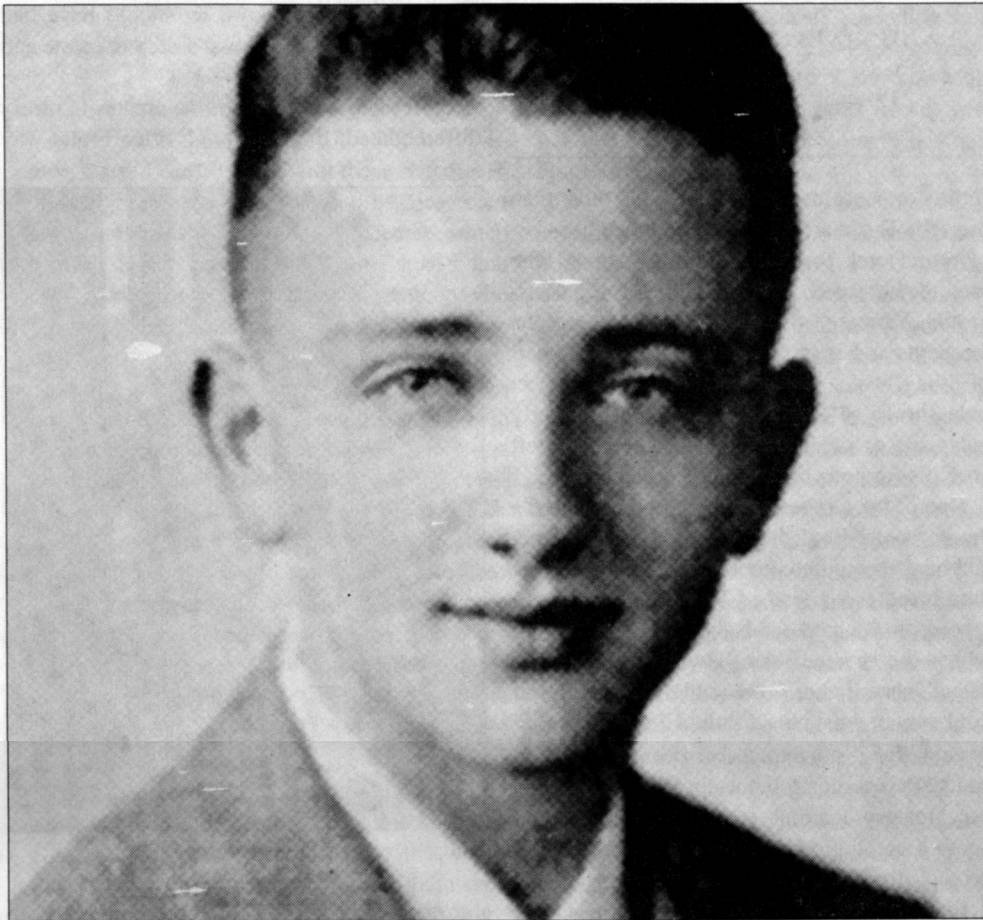
A talent for self-invention

Louis Begley's novel of Harvard in the 1950s

THOMAS MEANEY

Louis Begley

MATTERS OF HONOR
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Louis Begley in 1950, the year he matriculated to Harvard

moved, against all dictates of good sense (I was conducting with a much plainer, but sexy and freckly, graduate student an affair that was to endure until Easter vacation of the year in which this narrative opens, and besides, quite clearly, I was not their sort), to attempt to flirt at first with her and later with Janie – she had not telephoned or written to signify that she expected my arrival.

This erotic meandering into the past that suddenly clinches back to the present has been a signature mark of Begley's narrators. In *Matters of Honor*, he has tempered this lapidary inclination (his demanding sentences may be part of the reason why he has enjoyed such a big following in Germany) and adopted plainer language more fit to carry his story forward. For all his attention to ornate detail, Begley eschews visual descriptions, and the bulk of this novel is dedicated to the fine shifts in Henry's psychology as filtered through Sam's detached gaze. The perspective preserves the fundamental unknowability of Henry, all the while emphasizing his fullness as a character. What *Matters of Honor* does lack is the intrusion of diary entries or interspersed literary readings that have served as points of relief in Begley's work in the past (there are no letters from Henry in the book). We hear only Sam's measured assessment, which makes for occasional lungeurs.

Philip Larkin once defined a novel as a story that follows the fortunes of more than one character. When *Matters of Honor* was published earlier this year, some American reviewers criticized Begley for parading a cast of blanched, bloodless hangers-on who revolve solely around Henry. Archie's death, George's clandestine rape of Margot, Sam's depression and even the estrangement of Henry's parents are all passed over quickly, it is true, but the effect is to create the impression of a whirlwind of social wreckage to which only the reader can bear adequate witness.

Begley has been more concerned to give the reader an unsentimental seamless tapestry of a certain American scene rather than a series of sustained character studies. The friends and lovers who surround Sam and Henry drift in and out of their lives like the people in the novels of Anthony Powell, survived only by the dashed-out bits of dialogue they leave behind. Most crucially, this author has left the moral questions he raises powerfully unresolved. The price of Henry's worldliness is a detachment that ironically borders on exile from the world itself, yet Louis Begley still registers a kind of awe of this talent for self-invention.

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harks back to his undergraduate days whenever he tries to trace the genesis of his strange friendship with Ben, "the Widmerpool of Harvard Yard". In *About Schmidt*, Schmidt's old room-mate chides him about his latent anti-Semitism in his college days. (As Jerome Karabel documented in his 2005 study, *The Chosen*, anti-Semitism was far more virulent at Harvard in the 1950s than in previous decades; the admissions process emphasized "character" over academic achievement as a stratagem to bar qualified Jews from entry.) Henry desperately wants to overcome what he calls his "Jewism", but he realizes that, as a matter of principle, he cannot avoid it. "So long as there are people who care whether I am a Jew pretending to be a Gentile", he tells Sam, "I have to remain a Jew, even though inside I feel no more Jewish than smoked ham."

Henry is haunted by his early years in Poland. When asked offhandedly about John Hersey's 1951 novel, *The Wall*, he erupts into a tirade on how a historical novel about his experience is the last thing he needs. Sam becomes Henry's sounding board and even his receptionist, fielding worried phone calls from the parents in Brooklyn. Having defended his cousin George in a bar brawl during summer break, Henry asks if the injuries he suffered have changed him. "Eventually I grasped that he had been groping for some sort of similarity between my experience of brutality in New Orleans and his terror at being subjected to something of that sort during the war." Henry, Sam realizes, has channelled the entire force of his personality into achieving a means of sidestepping the crudities of history next time around.

The second half of *Matters of Honor* races through the decades up to the present. Archie dies in a car crash during a night of reckless driving. Margot gets shuffled between several men, all the while carrying on her affair with Henry. Henry and George join the same white-shoe law firm, where Henry succeeds in expanding the European operation. Henry's parents, who never come to terms with his vertiginous ascent, are the first casualties of his success. Aloof from the main action, Sam becomes a famous novelist, keeping up with his old friends at sporadic dinners over the years. After Henry gets into a legal entanglement in Mitterrand's France, Sam worries that he may kill himself. In *The Man Who Was Late*, Ben commits suicide after a failed love affair by taking a dramatic dive off a bridge in Geneva. Henry's ultimate plans are no less elaborate, but when Sam discovers them they bring the last pages of the novel to an unexpected – and cathartic – climax.

Begley's prose is relentlessly precise and typically braided with qualifications that recall the late style of Henry James. Few writers in English still spin out sentences like this one from the opening of Begley's remarkable third novel, *As Max Saw It* (1994), in which Max relays his impressions of his hostess:

Although Edna had known me really quite well – she and her best friend, Janie, had been the most spectacular examples of a new species of Radcliffe girl that appeared, miraculously, out of the Midwest in the fall of my last year at college, all patently rich and tall, and so beautifully formed, their bosoms beckoning under angora sweaters the shades of which matched the subtle hues of their lipstick, that I felt

Louis Begley is America's most *mondain* novelist. A successful New York lawyer for many years before becoming a writer, he is a deft chronicler of the lives of the American upper classes. Readers of his work can expect to be treated to disquisitions on real estate in the Hamptons, the intricacies of international mergers and feasts at which the Grands-Echézeaux '71 flows like Stella Artois. The bankers, lawyers, architects and advertising executives in his novels are sophisticated to the point where their material and intellectual trappings distract them from their moral predicaments. They may read the best books and keep fitful diaries, but they each have a damaged capacity for introspection, and that invites the reader to do much of their reflecting for them. In *About Schmidt* (1999), the stubborn Schmidt cannot accept his daughter's marriage to a colleague because he is unable to come to terms with his own genteel anti-Semitism. In *The Man Who Was Late* (1992), the determined Ben tries to make it as a Jew in the WASP establishment but ends up insulating himself from that world.

Begley, who was born in Stryj, Poland in 1933, has written about displacement most strikingly in his first and most critically acclaimed book, *Wartime Lies* (1991). That novel, based on Begley's own childhood experience in Occupied Poland, follows the fate of a Jewish boy named Maciek, who narrowly escapes the Holocaust by passing as a Catholic Pole and using false papers. The distance between Maciek and the successful men of the world in the other books is marked. The accession to worldliness and the price it exacts has turned out to be Begley's great subject, and it has never been treated so thoroughly as it is in his new novel, *Matters of Honor*, in which he goes a long way towards bridging the gulf between the helpless boy from Warsaw and the Manhattan power brokers of the later books.

Set at Harvard in the early 1950s, the novel begins as a campus tale of three room-mates. Sam Standish, the narrator, is the adopted son of a down-at-heel WASP family from the Berkshires who has recently learned he is the recipient of a large trust fund. Archie Palmer is a rugby jock with a drink problem. The third room-mate is Henry White, a Polish Jew recently emigrated to Brooklyn, who has fierce ambitions to get to the top of America's elite. When Sam first meets him, Henry is transfixed by a girl at the window who is blowing kisses and gesturing wildly to him. Margot Hornung, who comes from a prominent Jewish family and is the only Radcliffe freshman who possesses a diaphragm, will become his passport to the beau monde.

Harvard is a touchstone in Begley's fiction. In *The Man Who Was Late*, the narrator, Jack,