JOHN H. SUMMERS

Everybody Must Get Stoned: An Era Masterfully Evoked

Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties, by Robert Stone. Ecco, 229 pages, $25.95

BOOK REVIEW

"Prime Green" was the color of the light rising from the horizon at Manzanillo Bay, flashing before Robert Stone in the autumn of 1966. Mr. Stone had come to Mexico for *Esquire*. His assignment was to find his friend Ken Kesey, who had become a fugitive from the drug police in San Francisco. Kesey was living in a complex of dilapidated concrete buildings several miles from the bay, alongside a crew of bohemians featuring Neal Cassady and his parrot Rubiaco. The neighbors were scarce; the beaches were empty; the marijuana was seeded but plentiful.

Esquire declined to publish Mr. Stone's account of the scene. In common with most editors at upmarket magazines, they wanted something to confirm their advertisers' stereotype of the bohemian as criminal. But Mr. Stone's memory of the visit to Manzanillo stands today for the exalted capacity for wonder and awe, the intensity of illumination available in "The Sixties" for those who knew how to find it. "In the moments after dawn, before the sun had reached the peaks of the sierra, the slopes and valleys of the rain forest would explode in green light, erupting inside a silence that seemed barely able to contain it. When the sun's rays spilled over the ridge, they discovered dozens of silvery waterspouts and dissolved them into smokey rainbows. Then the silence would give way, and the jungle noises rose to blue heaven. Those mornings, day after day, made nonsense of examined life, but they made everyone smile. All of us, stoned or otherwise, caught in the vortex of dawn, would freeze in our tracks and stand to, squinting in the pain of the light, sweating, grinning. We called that light Prime Green; it was primal, primary, primo."

Arriving at this gorgeous passage, I was reminded of the fine literary craftsmanship of Mr. Stone's early novels—in particular *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), *Dog Soldiers* (1974), which won the National Book Award, and *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981). In those novels, as in the above passage, the author strikes up believable hallucinogenic moods and sympathies, while straining, now and then, in the direction of metaphor.

With equal fluency, the novels chronicle the cultural despair that accompanied the waning of the 60's. Mr. Stone's characters seem to me perfect antonyms of the "new man," a source of utopian energy in the American unconscious since Crevecoeur asked, "What then is the American, this new man?" and answered that he lived in "the most perfect society now existing in the world." The aspiration for a "new man," capable of infinite dialectical development, reached commanding heights in Emerson's "oversoul," William James' "possibility man" and Nietzsche's "overman."

The radicals of the 1960's, unimpressed with paeans to the perfection of their own society, returned the aspiration to its colonial roots by way of Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara's *hombre nuevo*. *Dog Soldiers* marked the end of all that. Mr. Stone showed soldiers and hippies alike regressing into primitive atavism, the "new man" giving way to the victim and the survivor, the exemplary characters of the 1970's and 1980's.

COURTESY OF ROBERT STONE

Robert Stone, holding a sombrero over his head, with his friend Ken Kesey.

Prime Green begins in the summer of 1958, with Mr. Stone nearing the end of his service in the U.S. Navy. He'd enlisted at age 17 to escape the poverty and confinement of the hotel room he'd shared with his mother since he was a boy. (His mother, he says, taught school in New York, though he cannot say for certain that he ever learned her real name. His father's name he never even thought he knew.) After his discharge, he went to work in Brooklyn for a newspaper aimed at enlisted sailors, then took a job with the *Daily News* and attended classes at N.Y.U. In 1960, he quit college, moved with his wife to the French Quarter of New Orleans and sold encyclopedias in the outlying areas. One year later, he was back in New York, writing advertising scrap for furniture companies.

So it goes—so it went. Over the course of the decade, Mr. Stone flitted from place to place, job to job. A writing fellowship at Stanford introduced him to Northern California and Ken Kesey. In 1964, he went back to his beloved New York on a Greyhound bus. A group of sailors boarded at Chicago and beat him up at Highspire, Penn. He passed a few months at home, traveled to Paris—where he tried to find Samuel Beckett, for no reason that he can now recall—then returned to Manhattan and took a job writing headlines at a tabloid newspaper. There followed another temporary job, this one at an art gallery on Madison Avenue. At every point he made friends, took drugs and talked politics with leftists, in whose company he grew less confident as the decade clambered on. In 1968, he moved his family to London. Soon after, he went to Hollywood to watch Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward turn *A Hall of Mirrors* into a bad film. Finally, inevitably, Saigon.

Mr. Stone remembers it all with a mix of anecdote, commentary and deft description. *Prime Green* is excellent on almost every page—free of solipsism, in light of how many experiences he acquired "on the road," and yet equally free of cliché. "The changes … in politics and popular culture may have seemed more profound than they were," he writes. "They were attended by moralizing and vulgarity of all sorts, and they were very unsettling to many. We won a little and lost a lot, depending." The word "revolution" slips into the book on four minor occasions. This must be some kind of lowball record for a memoir of the 1960's.

About drugs he has a lot to say, and a lot to try to remember. Copious quantities of marijuana, peyote, heroin and LSD were consumed in his circle. That he and his friends represented the last generation to experiment with these elixirs is not lost on him. Mr. Stone's animus against the apparatus of drug control in America is hard to miss. Then again, the line between intense illumination and permanent bewilderment did not stay steadily in view in the freedom days, either. Of the group gathered in Mexico in 1966, he writes ruefully: "From the start, I think, the authorities in the state of Colima understood that there was more hemp than Heidegger at the root of our cerebration, and many of us had trouble distinguishing Being from Nothingness by three in the afternoon." Elsewhere, he notes that "psychedelia became more and more central to our concerns as time passed."

Our "concerns"? Yes, indeed. At a party in Los Angeles in 1969, Mr. Stone obeyed the fashion and sucked nitrous oxide from balloons, or rather from what he thought were balloons. After the revelers had gotten themselves good and gassed, one of their children bitchily pointed out what nobody else had noticed: The balloons were actually condoms. The child was irritated that the adults had restricted the minors to one balloon each. Which is probably not a bad rule, after all.

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THE LITERARY WEB

This week's book reviews, exclusively at www.observer.com

MAX ABELSON

Money Changes Everything: Twenty-Two Writers Tackle the Last Taboo with Tales of Sudden Windfalls, Staggering Debts, and Other Surprising Turns of Fortune, edited by Jenny Offill and Elissa Schappell. Doubleday, 291 pages, $24.95.

Money is unfunny: The poor don't chuckle about bills, titans like Donald Trump are humorless—and, for most everyone else, finance is more of a sore spot than a punch line. And yet *Money Changes Everything* is as funny as a lascivious sex column. Instead of CNBC analysts or C.P.A.'s, we get 22 gossipy and anxious writers. Unlike the average taxpayer, most good writers are funny about money, probably because most of them have only a little of it—but believe they're just one best-seller away from lots and lots. Though not every essay in *Money Changes Everything* is about New York, the city is its emotional and geographic core—especially Manhattan real estate, that mesmerizing source of checkbook angst. Half the accounts here revolve around New York co-ops or walk-ups or full-floor apartments. The other common theme? Embarrassment—embarrassment at having too much, at not having enough, at squandering it early, at not making a fortune, at wanting more in the first place. Sound familiar?

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