Everybody Must Get Stoned: An Era Masterfully Evoked

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

“Prime Green” was the color of the light rising from the explosion at Manzillo Bay, flashing before Robert Stone in the summer of 1966. Mr. Stone had come to Mexico for "Esquire," his assignment was to find his friend Ken Keeley, who had become a fugitive from the drug police in San Francisco. Keeley was living in a complex of dilapidated concrete buildings several miles from the beach, alongside a crew of bohemians featuring Neal Cassady and his parrot Ribaucou. The neighbors were sparse; the beaches were empty; the marijuana was seeded but plentiful. "Esquire" declined to publish Mr. Stone's account of the scene. In conversation with most editors at out of market magazines, they wanted something to confirm their advertisers' worst fears of the bohemian as criminal. But Mr. Stone's memory of the visit to Manzillo stands today for the exact 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 climbed too high, when the peaks of the sierra, the slopes and valleys of the rain forest would explode in green light, catching inside a silence that was humid; barely able to contain it. When the sun's rays spilled over the ridge, they discovered dozens of silver waterfalls and dissolving them into smoke rainbows. Then the silence would give way, and the jungle noises rose to a blaring crescendo. All of us, stoned or otherwise, caught in the vortex of dawn, would freeze in our tracks and stand to, squatting in the pain of the light, sweating, praying. We caught 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 the most polished editors at market magazines, the novel's chronicle the cultural despair that accompanied the waning of the 60's; Mr. Stone's characters seem to see the perfect antonyms of the "new man," a source of utopian energy in the American unconscious since Cervantes asked, "What is them in the American, this new man?" and answered that he lived in "the most perfect society now existing in the whole world." The phrase of the "new man," capable of infinite dialectical development, reaching command heights in Emerson's "over-soul," William James' "possibility man" and Nietzsche's "overman."
The radicals of the 60's, unprepared with passions to the perfection of their own society, returned the aspiration to its colonial roots by way of Franz Fanon and Che Guevara's hombre nuevo. Dog Soldiers marked the end of all that. Mr. Stone showed how ideas and utopias alike regressed into primitive atavism, the "new man" giving way to old-fashioned, the exorcist, the exemplary characters of the 1970's and 1980's. Prime Green begins in the summer of 1958, with Mr. Stone's return to the end of his senior year at Stanford University. He enlisted at 17 to escape the poverty and confinement of the hotel room he shared with his mother, since he was born. In his youth, he says, taught school in New York, though he cannot say for certain that he ever learned her 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 added encyclopedias in the outlying areas. One year later, he was back in New York, writing advertising copy for furniture companies. The money goes so well, he writes, "They were at tempted by morality 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 steady 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 education, and many, if not most of the trouble distinguishing Being from Nothingness by three in the afternoon." Elsewhere, he notes that "psychodelia" became more and more central to our concerns as time passed."

"Out of the blue?" Yes, indeed. At a party in Los Angeles in 1969, Mr. Stone obeyed the fashion and sucked narcotics oxide from balloons, though he thought he would have been balloons. After the revelers had gotten themselves good and gassed, one of their children bittily pointed out what nobody else had noticed: The balloons were actually condoms. The child was irritated that the adults had restricted the minor use of bad balloons. This is probably not a bad rule, after all.

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Max Abelson


Money is unfunny. The poor don't chuckle about bills, tithes like Donald Trump are humorless—and, for most everyone else, financial advice of a sore spot than a punchline. 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 gossip 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, A supersensitive 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, atsquandering it early, at not making a fortune, at wanting more in the first place. Sound familiar?

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