

## Spy biz

**HORSE UNDER WATER.** By Len Deighton. Putnam. 255 pp. \$4.95.

Somewhere in *The Ecstasy Business* Richard Condon has his fat-brained actor-hero remark that the "eight-year cycle" in counterspy movies seems to be coming to an end. Wishful thinking, no doubt. The stuff has become a full-fledged genre now, where once we could have hoped to escape with a mere fad, and we are in for a dreary

time of it for a while.

The trouble is that the existential spy is now an adolescent with neither the novel charm of his first years nor yet the old-homey familiarity of the detective hero. He is at the uncomfortable point where he seems repetitive without quite being traditional, and one finds oneself annoyed rather than reassured that the several parts of *Horse Under Water* could have been placed in or taken out of Deighton's other novels without changing anything important.

It is also true, without mattering much, that *Horse Under*

*Water* was written and published in England in 1963 before either of his more celebrated books, and that no one thought it worth while then to publish it here. It has the same nameless, middle-class hero-spy who shall drudge for a living and be paid, and the same sort of tangled plot—intricate without being at all well-made—and the usual clutter of trivial detail that everyone finds remarkable whether the writer is Ian Fleming, John O'Hara or J. D. Salinger. Why *shouldn't* Deighton find it useful to throw in a chapter each about the tech-

niques of deep-sea diving and the varieties of narcotics? He has to write about something, after all, and he is too honorable, to pretend to be interested either in his cartoon characters or in the elaborate charades that they yawn their way through.

A couple of quibbles about Deighton's violation of his own loose-leaf premises. No-Name is given as a fellow of enormous awareness—perhaps the equivalent of high intelligence, though Deighton doesn't push it—but his dialogue often betrays him. "Don't tell me about their troubles," he remarks. "It might break me up emotionally." Well, that sort of crack is already passé in the drugstores of Des Moines, and No-Name is supposed to be hip enough either to come up with better material or just shrug.

In his other role as narrator, No-Name also forgets himself now and then and becomes a finger-pointer. Italicized phrases from 30-page-old conversations intrude like light bulbs in a cartoon strip, reminding all of us that the essential clue was right there all the time. We have every right to be offended. In the first place, we are all attentive readers. In the second place, if No-name is so cool about all of this, why does he keep nudging us in the ribs?

—RICHARD BOETH

## God man

**JESUS CHRISTS.** By A. J. Langguth. Harper & Row. 227 pp. \$4.95.

*Jesus Christs* is an oddly moving series of short takes, like vaudeville blackouts, except that the punch lines are ironic, often theological comments on the human condition. Christ appears in these short passages, none running more than a few pages, in various guises but always as Jesus Christ. Sometimes, for instance, he may be a contemporary young man eluding a trap being set by a member of some vice squad. Other times he may appear as the Biblical Jesus in the time and place of the historical Jesus, arguing with a presumptuous disciple or a possessive mother and trying to spare her feelings. The impact of these short studies is stunning.

The book is suffused with Christ, almost playful with subtle implications in Judeo-Christian theology, a sort of series of flashing lights that hypnotize the reader with their virtuosity and insights. Langguth has thought long and hard on the nature of Christ's message and meaning. This first novel is, perhaps with less overall intensity and imagination, the Grand Inquisitor scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* repeated with variations that suggest the nuances of being a man and a God among men.

The sets range from Jerusalem to a contemporary Congressional hearing and the cumulative picture of Jesus Christ is honest, deep and reverent. No one need hold against Langguth that he is not Dostoevsky: his first time out he has breathed fire, loving and warm, if not consuming.

—LESTER CORAN

## Sick, sick

**BLADE OF LIGHT.** By Don Carpenter. Harcourt, Brace & World. 181 pp. \$4.50.

Irwin Semple is one of the most repulsive protagonists in modern fiction. Hideous in aspect and disgusting in behavior, Semple has a ring of empty seats around him even in the most crowded movie theater. He is ill-coordinated, partly mad, ugly and ineffectual. Beneath all this, however, he is a man like any other man, and better than some.

At the beginning, Semple, aged 35, is released from a mental hospital. The book there—*(Continued on page 18)*

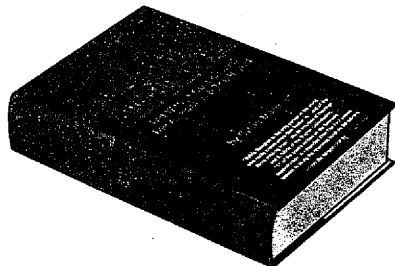
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