

A Potomac Snowflake

Reviewed by
L. J. Davis

Post
1/26/74

Book World

The reviewer is the author of "A Meaningful Life" and other novels.

DIRTY TRICKS: Or Nick Noxin's Natural Nobility.

By John Seelye

(Liveright, 152 pp. \$5.95)

The best thing about this new anti-Nixon satire by professor (of English, at the University of Connecticut) and novelist ("The Kid") John Seelys is the beautifully sustained quality of its language. Not since Nathaniel West's "Cool Million" has an author so perfectly mastered the insanely optimistic, grammatically perfect, morally saccharine prose of those unwitting Victorian humorists, Horatio Alger and Oliver Optic.

It would be nice to be able to say that Seelye has also equaled the savagery and insight of West's searing wit but such, unfortunately, is not the case. Like all great comic writers, West was a gutter fighter pure and simple, a scrappy little guy with a sure instinct for the jugular, a swift knee for the groin and a fast thumb for the eye. He was vulgar. He was vindictive. And he was superb. No one could touch him.

Great comedy is never written by your kindly old uncle as he sits by the fire; it is composed in a towering rage, and it seethes with bile. By contrast, Seelye has all the comic sense of a man trying to cheer up the occupants of a foundering lifeboat with a hearty rendition of Rub-a-dub-dub.

Not that the book is without its smaller virtues and I suppose I had better mention them before I let fire

this tomato I am holding in my hand. Seelye is always an entertaining writer and he cannot compose a bad sentence to save his soul. Like Marlon Brando, he's always an interesting performer to watch even when the gig is a bad one. And I suppose it is possible that certain knee-jerk Nixon haters will love every minute of this new book, from young Nick's first "heh heh heh" (at the sight of someone falling off a bicycle into a ditch) to the carefully sententious claptrap of his terminal speech.

Perhaps they will also get a big bang out of the spectacle of Nick's grocer father, N.O. Noxin, drilling holes in rat cheese and selling it as Swiss, mixing sand with the sugar, keeping his family in a street lamp-illuminated shack made of packing crates, and justifying all these practices with specious arguments of the very loftiest tone. Possibly a rib will be tickled here and there by the saga of poor dumb (but sly) Nick's innocent involvement with smuggling, white slavery, gambling, fraud and counterfeiting, followed by his temporary imprisonment for same. It is all very cheerfully and facilely done. And all very cute. Compared to the hideous reality of this bizarre ad-

ministration it is a snowflake fired at the hide of an elephant.

My God, where has John Seelye been this last year?

An executive coup thwarted by a piece of adhesive tape on the lock of a door. Howard Hunt and his red wig, Dita Beard and her heart attacks. Public Housing for the President. Strongboxes full of money. Curious gaps in evidence. High aides running around betraying each other as if deceit were going out of style, frantically confessing to crimes with the untidy haste of stockbrokers throwing themselves off tall buildings. The Saturday Night Massacre and the game of musical attorneys general. Robert Vesco buying whole countries to hide in. Patrick Gray twisting slowly in the wind. The milk fund. The Hughes fund. The Ellsberg case. Segretti. Joe Namath on the enemies list.

What can possibly happen next? Transvestitism? A plot to sell Massachusetts to Saudi Arabia Reality has come unhinged and the world has changed. It is history as squalor and farce, and about the last thing we need right now is a good clean chuckle. It sticks in the craw, rather, and it makes one want to take this sunny little book and throw it against the nearest wall.