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Books of The Times

1 Tear, 2 Laughs and Horrors

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

LIMBO. By Joan Silver and Linda Gottlieb. 181 pages. Viking. \$6.95.

THE NIXON RECESSION CAPER. By Ralph Maloney. 192 pages. Norton. \$5.95.

CAR. By Harry Crews. 192 pages. Morrow. \$5.95.

These are three entertainments—not entertainments in the sense that they are light as air and will make you giggle, but because they are one-dimensional in the effects they strive for, which are, respectively, sad, funny and horrifying, I think. To begin with the weakest of the three, the sad one: "Limbo," by Joan Silver and Linda Gottlieb, is a cleverly constructed semi-documentary story about the plight of P.O.W. and M.I.A. "next of kin," militarese for the wives of Americans imprisoned, missing or dead in the war in Southeast Asia.

Three representative figures are detailed here.

The three are in limbo in and around a Florida Air Force base—blown about by doubts as to whether their husbands are still alive, tortured by sexual urges to live in the immediate present, and torn apart by the conflicting demands of loyalty to and dissent from America's official cause. And each reacts in her own representative way, all of which comes close to producing a sense of pathos and sadness, outrage at the cruelties of war, and a tear-jerking ending...

... Except that the authors appear for a while to be up to something even more ambitious. For they tell their story in an antiseptic, intelligently clichéd prose that makes one think they are holding back. They contrive their plot so neatly that one senses manipulation for some ulterior purpose. They introduce each chapter with an excerpt from authentic Air Force correspondence to the wives, or other official documents, which contrasts ironically with the experiences of the characters, and gives one the impression that the story is pointing toward some ideological lesson. So that when one gets to the end and discovers that a tragic picture was all that was intended, it is really too late for tears. Or else one has to think that the bite of the irony has bad occlusion.

Four Good Men and True

"The Nixon Recession Caper," by the Ralph Maloney who wrote "The 24-Hour Drink Book," is funny, or at least funny enough to have evoked two horse-four chuckles and a half-dozen from this reader. It's a comedy about a crisis brought on by depression.

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