

## BOOKS

## About Begley

LOUIS BEGLEY

*Matters of Honor*

By ADAM KIRSCH

Louis Begley is one of the best American novelists, but no one would accuse him of being the most lovable. His books do not engage the reader with that puppyish, garrulous, finally evasive sincerity which, since the eclipse of postmodernism and minimalism, has been the favorite mode of younger fiction writers. Rather, Mr. Begley leads his reader in a minuet of ironies, a delicate dialectic of concealment and revelation. His narrators, who are always his surrogates, tend to be remote, slightly sinister figures, estranged from the reader by the very power and sophistication they so jealously guard. Mistler in "Mistler's Exit" (1998), dying luxuriously in Venice, or the misanthropic Schmidt in "About Schmidt" (1996), are not the kind of men we expect to find at the center of American novels. They are not Caspar Goodwoods but Gilbert Osmonds.

Yet if Mr. Begley's narrators seem to mistrust the reader, and have inspired many readers with mistrust, it is only because Mr. Begley himself trusts the reader so entirely. He quietly invites us to see all the way around his narrators, to judge them as they cannot judge themselves. Above all, Mr. Begley asks the reader to mark the distance between the author and his creations, and to wonder why he chooses to incarnate himself in such cold avatars.

That choice, Mr. Begley has always hinted, is connected with his childhood experience of the Holocaust, which he chronicled in his first novel, "Wartime Lies" (1991). This novel tells Mr. Begley's own story through the distorted mirror of Maciek, a privileged Jewish boy who miraculously survives the Nazi occupation of Poland. The challenge of Mr. Begley's fiction has always been to connect Maciek with Mistler and Schmidt — to understand

Please see **BEGLEY**, page 13

how the frightened, helpless child became the guarded, trustless adult. Or, rather — since Mr. Begley is not to be strictly identified with any of his creations, whose stories al-

ways diverge in some obvious way from his own — to understand what Mr. Begley is telling us about himself through these deliberately partial fictions. Read rightly, his novels are all fragments of a great confession; and that confession is so carefully balanced between the sharpest irony and the most painful self-analysis as to remind us of Thomas Mann — another writer who at first seems to hold the reader at arm's length, and then becomes almost frightening in his daring openness.

"Matters of Honor," Mr. Begley's terrifically intelligent, moving, and entertaining new novel, is not just his best book since "Wartime Lies." It is also the book that brings his entire achievement as a novelist into focus. That is because it deals, in typically indirect fashion, with Mr. Begley's own passage from child to adult, European to American, powerlessness to power, poverty to wealth. It shows how a man very like Mr. Begley pursues and claims the prizes that we find on Mr. Begley's own CV. (Long before he became a novelist, he was a powerful partner at the law firm of Debevoise & Plimpton.) And it contemplates, with an almost scandalous perspicuity, the terrible price of that success.

"Matters of Honor" opens at Harvard in the early 1950s, as the narrator — Sam Standish, the adopted son of an aristocratic New England family — meets his new college roommates. Archie Palmer, a precocious alcoholic and the son of an Army officer, will mostly remain on the sidelines of the novel. At its heart is Henry White, the third roommate, and Mr. Begley's own surrogate. White

was born Weiss, as Mr. Begley was born Begleiter; both move from Poland to Brooklyn, graduate from Harvard in the mid-1950s, serve in the Army, then become successful lawyers. And both are haunted, throughout their American careers, by their childhoods in occupied Poland.

Despite this closeness, or because of it, Mr. Begley makes the crucial decision not to use Henry as the narrator of "Matters of Honor." Instead, we see Henry's life unfold, from college to retirement, through the eyes of Sam, who observes his friend, as even the best friends do, only intermittently and from a distance. This estranging perspective makes Henry finally unknowable, and allows Mr. Begley to avoid the factitious transparency that an author might feel compelled to provide when writing about a version of himself. It is, in fact, the uncanny sensation that Mr. Begley is writing about himself as if he were a stranger that gives "Matters of Honor" its keen, elegiac power. "There is a need," as one minor character says during a discussion of Alfred Jarry's "Ubu Roi," "for distance between the actor and the role."

As even this detail shows, Mr. Begley is the most deliberate of writers, and no scene or observation in "Matters of Honor" fails to signify. This is emphatically the case in the opening pages, when Sam first sees his new roommate in a posture that will be emblematic of his entire life. Henry is standing at the window of their dorm room, enthralled by a glamorous girl who is flirtatiously waving to him, but whom he is afraid to actually pursue. That girl, Margot Hornung, will go on to be Henry's great love, the eternal-feminine that leads him onward through life. "Margot and Margot's parents are way up at the top of a tree," Henry explains to Sam; "We're way down at the roots. But that's the one tree I will learn to climb. Otherwise, there is no point in my being here."

Mr. Begley allows that last phrase to exfoliate, devastatingly, through the novel. When Henry tries to justify his "being here," he doesn't just mean here at Harvard, or here in America: he means here



on the planet, alive at all, after so many near-deaths in his childhood. Henry is always reluctant to talk about his experiences in the war, and in his sharp rebukes to curious, kindly strangers, we surely hear something of Mr. Begley's own impatience. Yet his fate as a survivor determines everything about Henry: his iron will to succeed, his insistence on imposing himself on the world. As the toll of Henry's success — on his friendships, his parents, his career, and his happiness — keeps growing, we come to realize that Henry's way of coping with the Holocaust is, in fact, the very wound that the Holocaust inflicts on him.

At the same time, Henry is hardly the only character in the novel who is dead-set on reinventing himself, or who toils in the bonds of his childhood. Archie, whose death in a car crash can be predicted early on — he is always a reckless drunk driver — is actually killed while driving a sports car that his mother gives him as a wedding present. Unconsciously, but unmistakably, his mother is the abettor of his vices and the author of his death. The same is true of Sam, whose life as a writer is a headlong flight from his miserable childhood. Indeed, Sam — with his almost completely concealed homosexuality, his decades-long Freudian analysis, his WASP status anxiety — is a perfect creature of the 1950s, and proof that Mr. Begley's understanding of human nature is catholic.

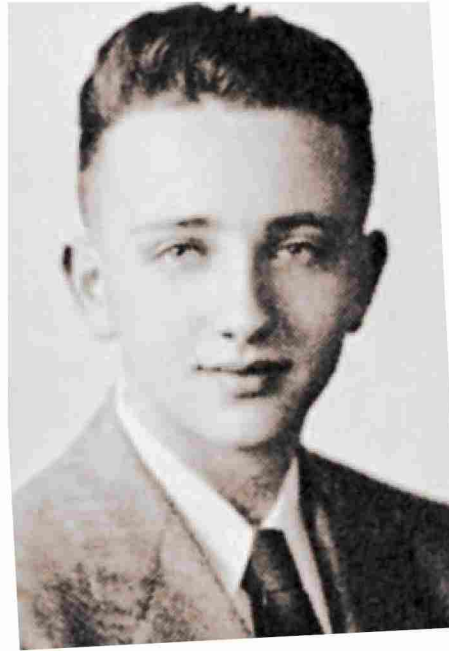
The first half of "Matters of Hon-

or" deals with the three friends' college careers; the second half moves, a bit awkwardly, into fast-forward, and the decades fly past until the novel's culminating episode in the early 1980s. That episode, in which Henry's machinations as a high-powered lawyer finally go wrong, leads him to repudiate his whole life in the most dramatic way possible. Because that life is so clearly a version of Mr. Begley's, Henry's renunciation has a terribly emblematic quality: One feels that Mr. Begley has arraigned a part of himself and passed final judgment.

At the same time, however, Henry is certainly not his creator. Henry spends his life in thwarted pursuit of Margot; Mr. Begley has been twice married and has three children. Henry's career ends in scandal; Mr. Begley retired from the law, full of honors, in 2004. Most important of all, Henry is not a writer: that is, he cannot reflect on himself, cannot understand the flaws and dangers in his approach to life, as Mr. Begley so thoroughly does. Art, Mr. Begley leaves us to understand, is the only medium in which the aporias of life can be tentatively, ironically, yet savingly resolved. No recent novel has demonstrated that truth so brilliantly as "Matters of Honor.

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**ABOUT BEGLEY** The author's high school class photo from 1950, the same year he matriculated to Harvard.