

Some Trip

by Michael O'Donnell

Review of *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*

by Robert Stone.

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The ubiquitous scenes of drug use in Robert Stone's memoir, *Prime Green*, would be a terrible bore if they didn't produce some of Stone's funniest, most vivid writing. When the time comes and everything's all tallied up, nothing really will atone for smoking grass or taking Dilaudid or sucking gas from balloons—or were they inflated condoms?—in front of children, and Stone knows it. Still, it is a testament to his writerly flair and his general likeability that when one reads a description like this, of an LSD trip in which a brush fire suddenly appears, one laughs *with* Stone and not *at* him: "We had not started the fire, but we tried to make the best of it. A beautiful girl sat on a limb playing Bach on her flute until the aromatic smoke of burning leaves drove her down. Horses appeared and chased us until one of the women, an equestrienne, chased *them*."

If the '60s were a jungle, then Stone wore camouflage. The celebrated novelist comes across as mild, unobjectionable, and moderate (considering). Perhaps he was so steady because he was a veteran and had a young family. "My closest friends seemed all in various ways involved with Maoism," he writes. "No visible improvements seemed to be coming out of this, but it was good to see our friends again." Stone kept some impressive company during these years—Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac—but one gets the sense that he laughed quietly while others roared, and that his best contributions came after the event, at the typewriter.

Although Vietnam looms on practically every page of *Prime Green*, this isn't a political memoir. There's no mention of race riots or Kent State, and the assassinations of Dr. King and the brothers Kennedy get barely a few lines each. The book's most conspicuous tie to the '60s is a handful of epic (ahem) journeys: hiking across the Santa Cruz Mountains while Neil Armstrong was making his footprints in lunar dust; hiding out in Mexico with Kesey, who was evading drug charges; riding from San Francisco to the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows in the retrofitted bus, "Further." (Stone's cohorts, a batch of unruly pinkos if ever there was one, painted Barry Goldwater mottos on the windows just to keep the locals guessing.)

One of the great pleasures of the book is the intimate glimpse it affords into the life of Stone as a young writer. He published his first novel, *A Hall of Mirrors*, during these years, and the reader gets to experience the anxieties and excitements of a

real talent waiting to break through. Like a losing pie-eating contestant, he frantically looked about himself only to see Kesey finishing book after book while his first was still in process. The reader celebrates with him when he bags a top New York agent and a publishing deal.

The road to success, it seems, is paved with cockroaches. Here is Stone shilling Collier's Encyclopedias door-to-door in New Orleans (and landing briefly in jail); here he is holding his nose and pounding out copy for the McCarthyite *New York Daily News*. He retained his first rejection letter from the *New Yorker*—its handwritten "try us again" might as well have been a yellow brick road. Most memorably, Stone crafted ghastly headlines for a string of skeezy tabloids, the most portentously named of which was the *National Thunder*. Readers of his novel *Dog Soldiers* will be amused, or vexed, to recognize the character John Converse's best headlines, which it turns out were actually Stone's: "Mad Dentist Yanks Girl's Tongue!" "Skydiver Devoured by Starving Birds!"

Stone's prose is frequently compared to Hemingway's—crossed with Vonnegut in oversized flak helmets, one might say—and he repeatedly invokes Papa in these pages for anecdotes and inspiration. Stone is no Hemingway, but he can be very good, and he has given us a thoughtful and sympathetic portrait of a contentious time. *Prime Green* isn't a righteous defense of the '60s or an apologia for youthful antics; its author is wise enough to see that sometimes he and his friends were "clamorous and vain," and other times they were downright foolish. But they did have an enviable optimism, "an anticipation of the best in possibility," and they sure knew how to party.