

*Paradise*, however, quickly loses direction as Clements Olin joins a retreat at Auschwitz with 140 other retreatants: Zen enthusiasts, rabbis, priests, nuns, writers, tourists, artists, and survivors.

What comes next reads like a Facebook discussion of the Holocaust and World War II Poland. The retreat participants throw around sound-bite statements about the Holocaust, about who was guilty and how they were guilty and what should have been done and who is still responsible and why we should care and why we shouldn't care, and on and on. And then these characters disappear and other characters come on to make and unmake their own sound-bite points. I kept feeling that I should be taking frequent and extensive notes, and then I realized that it would not do me much good because probably that is how Peter Matthiessen got into this mess of a novel, by taking too many notes during his own three Zen retreats at Auschwitz.

But that's not all that is going on in the novel. There is also an absurd love plot between Olin and a woman preparing to become a nun, and a mysterious birth plot regarding Olin's origins straight out of Dickens. What begins as a thoughtful discussion of what it means to be Polish and American quickly dissolves into melodrama. Threaded through all this are ridiculous statements about Poles—the women have hairy armpits, all Poles drink too much and are snooty and pretentious, they and other Christians are responsible for the Holocaust.

Nothing can save this novel, certainly not the main character. He is moody, cranky, sexist, shallow, and lost. As a scholar, he seems completely unfocused. As a Polish American, he lacks any cultural identity. What he does and where he goes matters not at all. A reader would be better off reading one of the Polish writers who the main character says he has read in order to understand Poland, Auschwitz, and the Holocaust: Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, or Tadeusz Borowski. There one will learn a little bit about the Holocaust and so much more. Not in Peter Matthiessen's sketchy book.

While reading the book I kept thinking that this is a clumsy novel, all in all, written by someone who appears too tired to write a serious

novel about the issues he wants to take up. And then I read the *New York Times* review of the book, and it appears that Matthiessen was not only tired, he was also apparently dying as he worked on *In Paradise*. As a result, it belongs to that genre of final novels by great writers who should have buried their final pages before they were no longer capable of doing so, writers like Vladimir Nabokov, David Foster Wallace, Ralph Ellison, and of course Ernest Hemingway.

### Letter to the Editor

The review of *Polish Hero Roman Rodziewicz: Fate of a Hubal Soldier in Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Postwar England* (SR, January 2015) mistakenly states that the book's Preface was written by the late Marcus Leuchter. Mr. Leuchter has only been quoted in a short statement, while the entire book including the Preface was written by myself.

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