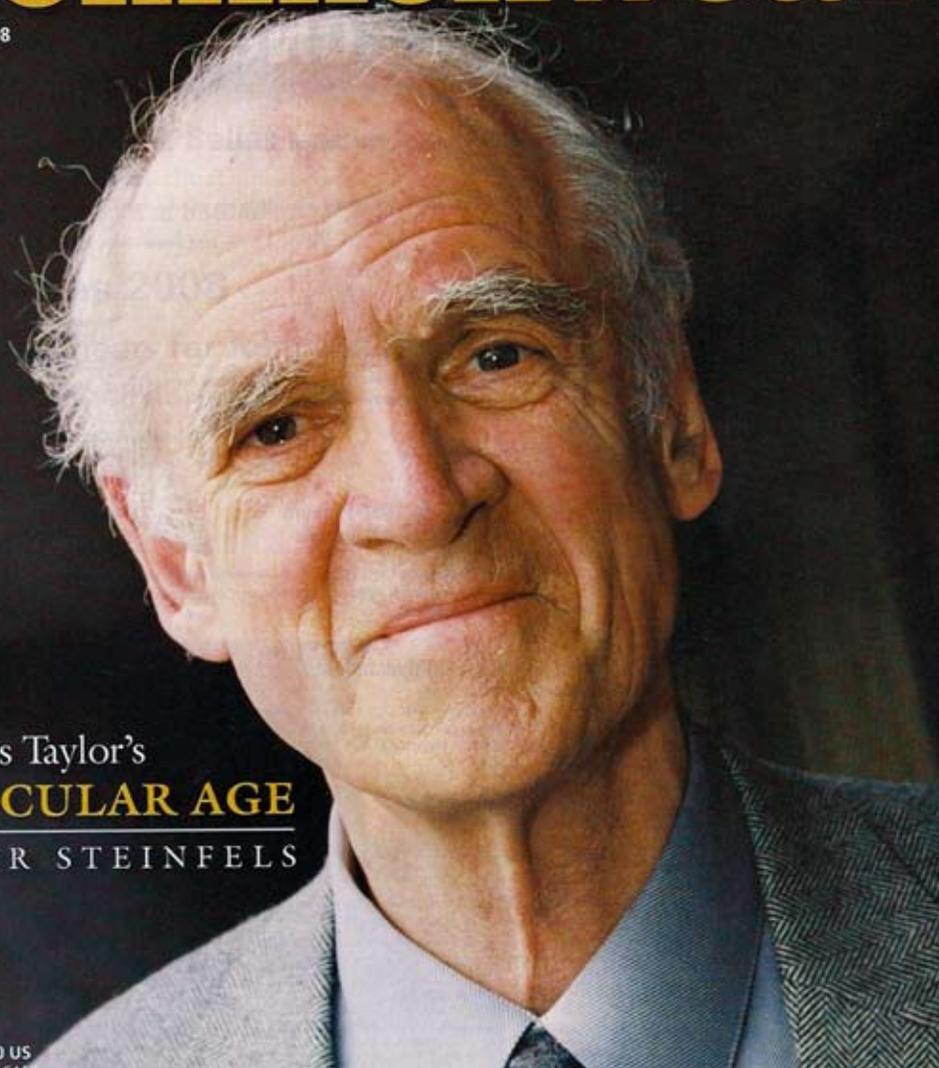


# Commonweal

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## Hitler's Doctor

1940

Jay Neugeboren

Two Dollar Radio, \$15, 284 pp.

Truth in reviewing requires I admit being not only a fan of historical fiction but a sometime practitioner. In that capacity, I joined an academic panel discussion a few years back with several students of the genre. The question before us was what distinguishes memorable and successful historical fiction from the mediocre and unsuccessful? The opinions expressed were learned and enlightening. But when my turn came, I confessed a lack of criteria and fell back on Justice Potter Stewart's famous remark about pornography: "I know it when I see it."

That remark popped back into my head as I read Jay Neugeboren's *1940*. At the very least, I suppose, it's safe to say that a convincing work of historical fiction isn't a matter of a detail-by-detail, Williamsburg-style restoration; rather, it casts a spell, conjuring up an atmosphere of authenticity that captures the complexity, urgency, and unpredictability of events now solidified into the certainties of history.

The time in Neugeboren's compelling, intensely intelligent novel is December 1940, the last month of the first full year of World War II; the place, the Bronx. Elisabeth Rofman, a medical illustrator at Johns Hopkins Hospital, periodically visits her father in his small, spare apartment. Dr. John Kafka, a Jewish refugee and physician at the hospital, induces her to use one such visit to drop in on his relative, another refugee from the Nazis, Dr. Eduard Bloch.

Twenty-five years her senior, Bloch is struck by "the extraordinary beauty of her person, and, despite or perhaps because of her extreme shyness, the palpable warmth of her presence." She

has an energizing effect on him. Absent "the kiss that Miss Rofman so tenderly bestowed on me," he wonders, would he be capable of recording "those revelations that I should have disclosed to the appropriate authorities long before this?" Touching his hands, Elisabeth feels a mix of wonder and revulsion that these were the "same hands that had once touched Adolf Hitler's private parts."

A descendent of Czech Jews who proudly identified with German culture, Bloch settled in Linz, where he was posted during his service in the Austrian army and eventually went into private practice. It seemed nothing out of the ordinary when Klara Hitler, the widow of a minor customs official, sought his services. The only unusual aspect—and this solely in view of subsequent developments—was the bond of devotion between quiet, pious Klara and her son Adolf.

The boy, remembers Bloch, was characterized by a "certain inwardness—a strangeness...he was a lad who seemed to live within himself." But it is his reaction to his mother's death from breast cancer that fixed him in Bloch's memory: "I have never seen one so prostrate with grief as this young man."

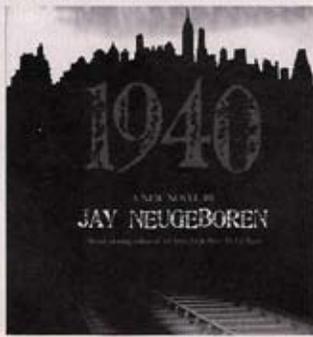
Hitler, in turn, never forgot the care Bloch gave his mother. In the wake of

the German annexation of Austria and an expanding, all-enveloping campaign of anti-Semitism, Bloch was the lone Jew singled out by a still-grateful Führer as an *Edeljude*—a noble Jew. Spared the indignities inflicted on his coreligionists, he was allowed to leave the Reich with a letter of recommendation from the head of the Nazi doctors' league.

Neugeboren's novel unfolds in part through journal entries made by Bloch as he attempts to record his recollections of Hitler. The doctor hopes that these memories of when the current master of continental Europe was a vulnerable youngster, undergoing "what was perhaps his deepest if not only experience of true human feeling...of affection, warmth, and love for another human being," might aid American intelligence. (Dr. Bloch's real-life recollections of his medical interactions with young Hitler were published in a two-part series in *Collier's* magazine, March 15 and 22, 1941.)

Inspired by Miss Rofman to write, Bloch is drawn into her life. Her father has gone missing, a mysterious if not unprecedented occurrence. He'd done so before. But this has left her alone in her struggle with her ex-husband, Dr. Alex Landau, over the fate of their troubled son Daniel who was institutionalized in a private children's home several years before. Though Daniel doesn't fit the neat eugenic categorization of the mentally deficient into idiots, imbeciles, and morons, his father and caretakers have decided that his budding sexuality requires that he be sterilized.

When Daniel escapes, Bloch lets Elisabeth use his apartment as a hideout. He doesn't prejudice the boy according to a eugenic template. Instead, he discerns a "neurological anomaly that inhibits him from relating to other human beings in what we would consider normal and appropriate ways...a real condition...for which we yet have no name." (It seems



TWO DOLLAR RADIO

likely the condition is Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism first diagnosed in 1944.)

Miss Rofman shares Bloch's passion for precise observation. Her elegant, exacting illustrations of a child's heart are part of the pioneering efforts by Dr. Helen Taussig and her collaborators at Johns Hopkins to devise a surgical cure for the congenital abnormality known as blue-baby syndrome. A delineator of children's hearts, heartsick with "love and worry" for her son, Elisabeth observes that "in proportion to the whole body...men's hearts were smaller than women's. This was a fact that she would remember to share with Daniel—and without commenting on its metaphorical implications—the kind of fact she knew he loved."

Professor Brödel, a master medical illustrator and one of Elisabeth's mentors at Johns Hopkins, counsels his pupils "to keep staring so as to cultivate the internal eye that belongs to memory." According to Brödel, it is "the accumulation of impressions...in memory, in imagination...that allowed one to truly see, and thereby, to reconstruct what one saw in the most effective way, and, more important, what we hoped others could see."

It is this true sight that Dr. Bloch, a man more of the heart than the head, seeks. He long ago gave up puzzling over metaphysical realities. ("I am, in point of fact, as little interested in God as I suspect God is in me," he states.) He can't explain why the shy, sensitive boy he treated in Linz grew into a Jew-hating, warmongering monster. The whole question of whether Hitler is an accident of history or an avatar of demonic forces no longer engages him.

The essence of the human predicament, Bloch sees with true clarity, is in how we treat one another. "To call Hitler evil, for example," he asks, "how does it change the ways in which we are called upon to act?" In his view, as a doctor, a Jew, and a human being, his duty is to attend to the patient or person in front of him. Asked by Elisabeth why he has been so very kind to her and her son, "Bloch put a hand on top of hers. To

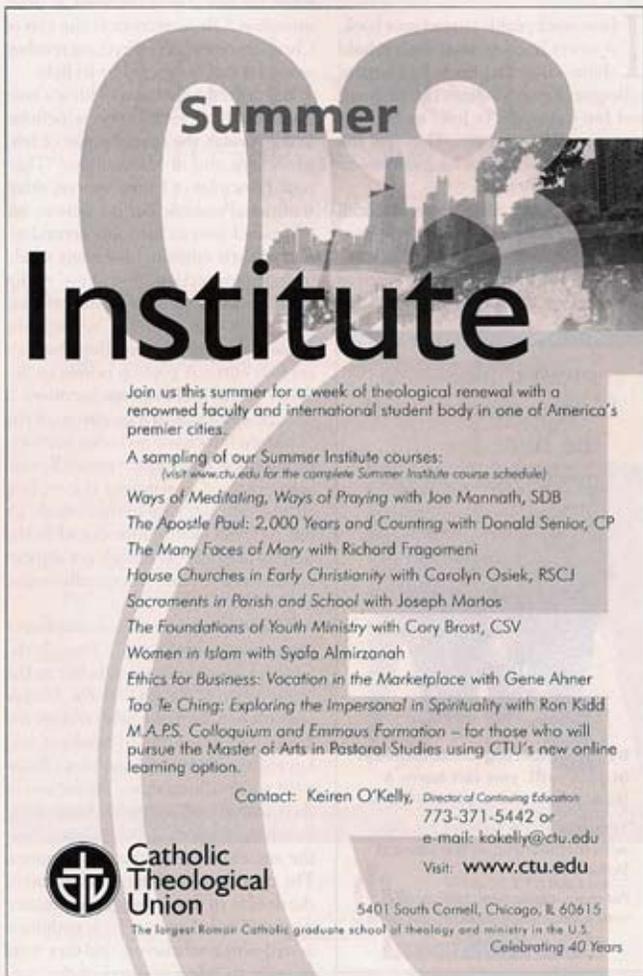
that question, I will reply in a proverbial Jewish manner, and ask: Why not?"

The truth for Dr. Bloch is that the world is filled with suffering of all kinds—physical, emotional, spiritual. No one is immune. Uncertain of what lies ahead, we are left with the everyday work of healing human hearts, real and metaphorical.

Jay Neugeboren's 1940 is a taut, nuanced, beautifully written novel that captures an anxious and uncertain time

in ways that a straight rendering of facts and dates could never achieve. Neugeboren casts a spell on the first page of his novel that never goes away. This memorable work of historical fiction is to be contemplated as well as savored. ■

*Peter Quinn is the author of the novels Banished Children of Eve and Hour of the Cat. His most recent book, Looking for Jimmy, is a collection of essays on the Irish-American experience.*



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