
PAPERBOUNDS

ARABIAN SANDS. By Wilfred Thesiger. Penguin, 1981. 347 pp. \$3.95

In southern Saudi Arabia sprawls a desert within a desert, nearly a half-million square miles of such desolation and emptiness that even Arabs dismiss it, calling it the Empty Quarter. There, for five years in the 1950s, lingered the English traveler and author Thesiger, in the company of a few Bedouins, living the merciless code T. E. Lawrence earlier called "a death in life." Filled with danger and every form of discomfort, these were the happiest years of Thesiger's life. The book that he was finally persuaded to write about this time is a masterpiece, recording a way of life that otherwise would have passed away unnoticed. Human life in the Empty Quarter was tested in the extreme—seared by an inhuman heat and stripped of all supports except camels, rags, and maybe a cooking pot. Out of this hardship, the Bedouin minted generosity, good humor, courage, and loyalty. Thesiger predicted that future authors would one day write more interesting books on Arabia. But none shall know what he knew: the feel of the land and the spirit of the Bedouin who inhabited it.

THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING. By Milan Kundera. Penguin, 1981. 228 pp. \$4.95

In 1968, novelist Kundera became a "nonperson" in his native Czechoslovakia. Only 20 years before, he had been a bright-eyed believer in the world promised by Karl Marx. Something happened on the way to Prague Spring: Kundera, like the Protean narrator of his novel, broke from the circle of true believers. His reasons, which provide the thematic

center of the novel, are bound not simply to local politics but to the fundamental question behind any political vision: the nature of man. Out of his experience, Kundera conceives a fictional world peopled by two necessary, antagonistic types. On one hand are the angels, idealists who always forget; on the other are the demons, who, unable to forget, must always laugh. Superficially a series of unrelated tales—some surreal, some autobiographical, some historical (a Czech politician, for instance, disappears from an official photograph, leaving a tell-tale trace)—the book slowly divulges its subtle unities of theme and voice. Kundera mocks both angels and demons, though it is clearly with the latter that he casts his lot. But his final point is deadly serious: Angels, who persist despite all experience in their notions of perfectability, can be dangerous—at least if their holy zeal goes unchecked by unholy laughter.

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG. By Charles Rosen. Princeton, 1981. 113 pp. \$4.95

For the death of "pretty music," Schoenberg (1874–1951) deserves much of the credit or blame—depending on one's ear. Controversy surrounded the life and career of the Austrian Jew who fled to the United States in 1936. Rosen, a professor of music at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, notes the hostile reception that conservative Viennese audiences gave to what they considered Schoenberg's violation of the "natural laws of music." Whether or not tonality is "natural," it had long provided a means of distinguishing musical sense from nonsense. Rosen argues that the "breakdown in tonality" is a fiction. What Schoenberg