

eslav Molotov took his dacha. The odious prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, having long envied a dacha owned by one Leonid Serebryakov, prosecuted him and took it. After Stalin's death, Serebryakov's relatives petitioned for the property's return and were granted half of it. The families of prosecutor and victim have been unhappy neighbors ever since.

Montefiore's tight focus on Stalin and his court produces some flaws of context. It is interesting to learn that when Mao Zedong visited Moscow in late 1949, on the eve of the Korean War, Molotov patronizingly quizzed him about Marxism and found that he had never read *Das Kapital*. But Montefiore wrongly assumes that Stalin didn't assist when the Chinese advanced

against American troops in 1950. He provided air cover, and both Moscow and Washington conspired to hush up the consequences, including a U.S. Air Force raid on the Soviet base from which the MiG-15s were flying.

On the whole, though, Montefiore has produced a remarkable and riveting work, one that reminds us of the extraordinary continuity of Soviet life, despite the bloodletting. "The families of the grandees who remained in power, Mikoyans, Khrushchevs, and Budyonnys, are regarded as a Soviet aristocracy even now," he notes. Politics hardly seem to matter: "Nina Budyonny, still a Stalinist, is best friends with Julia Khrushcheva, who is not."

—MARTIN WALKER

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

EMERGENCY SEX AND OTHER DESPERATE MEASURES:

A True Story from Hell on Earth.

By Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait, and Andrew Thomson. Miramax. 304 pp. \$25.95

In the 1990s, as the number of United Nations peacekeeping and observer missions ballooned, hundreds of young people from the United States and elsewhere signed on. Some sought escape, adventure, and a substantial paycheck; others aspired to serve God by serving humanity; and a fair number—reciting "new world order" like a mantra—wanted to be part of the big effort to spread democracy.

At first, making peace seemed to be all about making love under an intense tropical sun, trying on different cultures like so many exotic outfits, living in colonial houses with cooks and maids, and partying with abandon and guiltless pleasure, secure in the knowledge that they were serving a righteous cause. Then came the spectacular failures of UN peacekeeping in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Rwanda.

The three authors—Kenneth Cain, a Harvard-trained lawyer, Heidi Postlewait, a New York social worker, and Andrew Thomson, a New Zealand doctor—met and

became friends during their UN service. They tell of first arriving in conflict zones in half-disbelief. "I'm in a movie," Cain marvels as a Black Hawk helicopter takes him to Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. When UN colleagues there start to die, "it's not real," he thinks. "It's M*A*S*H; it's *China Beach*." Within weeks, several U.S. Black Hawks are shot down, and the United States and the United Nations recoil rather than retaliate. Illusions crumbling, the friends race to Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Liberia, where the United Nations and its most influential member, the United States, repeatedly place the safety of UN troops and workers over the needs of the people they have come, ostensibly, to serve. Hundreds of thousands of civilians die.

In vivid and intimate first-person accounts that range from a few paragraphs to 15 pages, the authors sequentially limn and reflect on experiences rarely exposed publicly. Cain arrives with a legal team in post-genocide Rwanda and, knowing that the UN had pulled out in the midst of the Hutus' massacres of the Tutsis just months earlier, finds himself ashamed to be there, assigned to beseech the survivors to treat genocide suspects more humanely. Postlewait describes the unsound security practices that

she believes led to the death of a colleague, contradicting the account in an official UN report. A year after UN peacekeeping forces stood by as thousands of men were killed in Srebrenica, Bosnia, Thomson arrives under the same UN flag to exhume the dead as evidence for war crimes prosecutions. He introduces himself to widows and other relatives. “When I tried to comfort them,” he writes, “they turned on me screaming, spraying spitfire into my face.”

Although the three enjoy small victories and develop intense and rewarding relationships, they battle a sneaking suspicion that, in the absence of forceful intervention against brutality, the standard UN peacekeeping offerings—training human rights workers, documenting atrocities, setting up

courts, and providing medical aid—only make matters worse. (Indeed, the UN commissioned an expert panel in 2000 to study its peacekeeping work and has subsequently adopted a number of reforms.) The authors’ initial enthusiasm for international peacekeeping turns into a passion for bearing witness, and the ultimate verdict is not a pretty one. No wonder United Nations muckety-mucks are displeased with this book, and not only for its revelations of ineptitude, corruption, and hedonism in UN ranks.

“For me there’s only one lesson,” Thomson writes. “If blue-helmeted UN peacekeepers show up in your town or village and offer to protect you, run. Or else get weapons. Your lives are worth so much less than theirs.”

—SHERI FINK

ARTS & LETTERS

MYSELF AND STRANGERS: A Memoir of Apprenticeship.

By John Graves. Knopf. 235 pp. \$24

First, a confession: I know John Graves, we sprang from the same Texas soil, we’re in the same business, and I admire both the man and his work. So *Myself and Strangers*, based on a journal Graves kept from the mid-1940s through the 1950s, has a particular appeal for me. But even if you’ve never heard of John Graves, you’re likely to enjoy his youthful preoccupations, worries, loves, searches, and encounters with a world not much with us anymore. “Old John”—now 83—occasionally breaks into a comment on “Young John,” but fortunately he doesn’t overuse that device or attempt to prettify his youthful actions and opinions.

In 1946, not long discharged from the U.S. Marines, in whose service he had lost his left eye in a firefight, Young John went to Mexico, “mainly because it was unconnected with my own personal background and it seemed to be a likely environment wherein to start getting my head straightened out,” an effort that would “endure sporadically for another 10 long years.” Graves didn’t think of himself as a writer then, but he soon had the bug. While getting a master’s degree in English at Columbia University, he started turn-

ing out short stories, the first of which “was taken, unbelievably, by *The New Yorker*.” (In time, a failed attempt at a novel and a distaste for writing formula fiction for slick magazines turned him toward nonfiction.) He taught English at the University of Texas, found little pleasure in academia, and in 1953 began anew his roaming in Spain, France, England, Scotland, and elsewhere.

“What do I really have to say as a writer or a person?” Graves asked in his journal in 1954. “This era of suspended breathing and fright in which we live—how can you say anything worth saying about it? You’d be better off ranching or farming or doctoring or in some other of the unquestionable occupations. This mood will pass but it is relevant. I would like so God-damned much to write something worth writing, and if I had the conception I am now competent enough with words to do it. But the conception is hard to come by.”

Graves didn’t know it, but he had stated in his frustration a couple of the occupations he would both practice and write about: ranching and farming. What would make them possible was a book he would publish in 1960, the now-classic *Goodbye to a River*. Some of the royalties paid for 400 acres of land close to Glen Rose, Texas, not far from his