

B O O K S

Why Was He So Evil?

Was it ancestry? Psyche? Sexuality? A brilliant survey of the theories that seek to explain Hitler

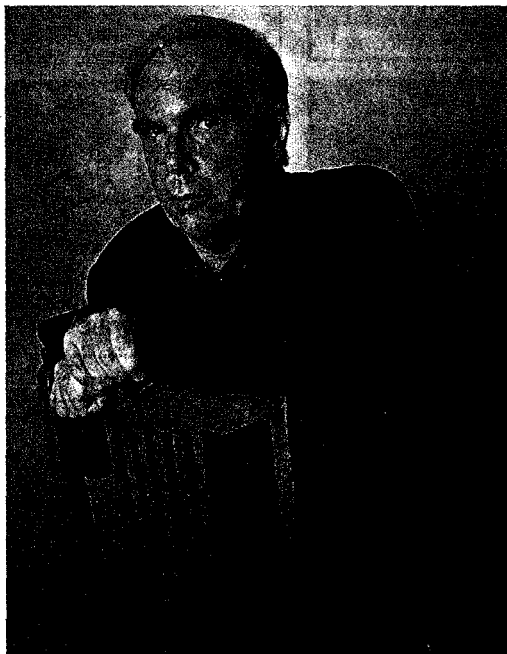
HITLER AND THE HOLOCAUST REMAIN the 20th century baseline for the discussion of evil, the ne plus ultra. But as Ron Rosenbaum writes in his restlessly probing and deeply intelligent book *Explaining Hitler* (Random House; 444 pages), Hitler has escaped intellectual capture. The old tabloid survival myth (HITLER ALIVE IN ARGENTINA!) perversely comes true in the realm of our historical deliberations. "The search for Hitler," says Rosenbaum, "has apprehended not one coherent, consensus image of Hitler but rather many different Hitlers, competing Hitlers, conflicting embodiments of competing visions."

The British historian Alan Bullock's early interpretation, for example, had Hitler as, among other things, a cunning, low-rent charlatan. The other great British Hitler explainer, H.R. Trevor-Roper, constructed a Führer on the grand, demonic scale: a Great Bad Man theory of history. Between the poles of Bullock and Trevor-Roper, historians, psychologists and others have brought an anguished ingenuity to trying to account for the monster or, in the newest scholarly and academic literature, to dismiss the old "Hitler-centric" theories in favor of larger abstractions (the German character, Christian anti-Semitism).

What Hannah Arendt called the banality of evil has engendered an astonishing banality of explanation. A 1991 installment of television's *Unsolved Mysteries* focused on three "Diabolic Minds"—those of Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy and Adolf Hitler. The Führer, it seems, "had a stern father and was unable to establish a healthy relationship to his mother." Auschwitz resulted, you see, from the child Adolf's low self-esteem. A 1981 book published in Germany suggested in all seriousness that when Hitler was a youth, a billy goat took a bite out of his penis. Hence his subsequent career. The famous Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal put it all down to the syphilis he thought Hitler had contracted from a Jewish prostitute. Others said Hitler himself had Jewish blood.

At a more sophisticated—but still far-fetched—level, George Steiner's controversial novel, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, argued, as Rosenbaum says, "that the tolerance, the secret approval, the permission [Hitler] received from the rest of the world to exterminate the Jews can be explained by the universal hatred mankind has for the Jewish 'invention of conscience,' for the torment inflicted on man by the ethical demands of Moses, Jesus, and Marx."

It is impossible to think about civilization, responsibility, human possibility, evil—or, of course, God—without confronting Hitler. In this brilliantly skeptical inventory of the world's Hitler-thinking, Rosenbaum analyzes not only the multiple Hitler theories but also the agendas and fantasies that the theorizers bring to their subject.



ROSENBAUM: Looking into the heart of darkness

His book may be useful to the surprising number of people—Flat-Earthers of the moral realm—who, even now, refuse to believe in the existence of evil. To them, admitting evil's reality seems to empower the irrational in an intolerable way, to give it a certain vulgar, primitive mystification. We can't have that, can we?
—By Lance Morrow



MORAN: Writing that's soothing to the soul

Loving Care

A fine romance between a patient and his nurse

NEXT TO A BOY AND HIS DOG OR A girl and her horse, no fictional setup is quite as durable—and automatically touching if done well—as the story of a sick man and his nurse. Now, to *A Farewell to Arms* and *The English Patient*, add another memorable star-crossed Red Cross romance: Thomas Moran's second novel, *The World I Made for Her* (Riverhead; 273 pages), which delves into the bond between James Blatchley, a semicomatose New York City cop, and Nuala Riordan, his Irish-immigrant caregiver. Struck down (as the author himself was once) by a horrifically stubborn strain of chicken pox, the immobilized Blatchley has been rendered tongue-tied not by Cyrano-like shyness but by an emergency tracheotomy and an ominous respirator that he has nicknamed, Ken Kesey style, the Machine.

Given the story's medical ground rules, tragic, unrequited love is the only love Blatchley can reasonably hope for, and he makes the most of it, courting the plain but gentle Nuala solely from his neck up, in thoughts and dreams and the occasional rounding of his lips. Drifting among blackouts, hallucinations and long days of morphine-muted delirium, he stitches together a history for Nuala as an archetypal carefree country girl, all windblown red hair and stylized pink cheeks. But since Blatchley is also an intellectual (his police beat was forged and stolen art), he isn't satisfied with his first-draft images. As he revises and colors them in, he achieves a union with Nuala that, against all odds, isn't totally one-sided. The result is a reading experience as fresh and basic as lying down feverish on cool, clean linens with loving hands to tuck you in.
—By Walter Kirn