

ESZTERHAS' JOE

1974

Kids vs. Parents

CHARLIE SIMPSON'S APOCALYPSE. By Joe Eszterhas. 211 pages. Random House. \$5.95.

Last year, President Nixon not only ended our war in Vietnam, he redeemed his pledge to bring our country together, for in the mystery of Watergate all Americans have found communion of a sort. Now that contempt for our governors is no longer exclusively the prerogative of the young and hairy, Mr. Nixon may claim credit for bringing peace with honor to our other great national conflict of the '60s, the war between parents and their children. This war has not lacked its historians; Joe Eszterhas, in a book as depressing for what it says as for the way it says it, recounts one of the last and grimmest campaigns.

On April 21, 1972, Charlie Simpson, a 25-year-old farm boy, took his M-1 Army rifle into the main street of Harrisonville, Mo., killed three people, wounded several others and then shot himself. The town might have accepted the incident for what it was—the paroxysm of a madman—but because two policemen were among the dead, the town decided that a revolution had begun. The town became an armed camp: for days a sniper with a rifle and firemen with hatchets glowered at the few "hippies" who had been Charlie's friends. These long-haired kids, it seems, had taken to lounging on the courthouse steps, using bad language



James D. Wilson—Newsweek

Eszterhas: Comic-opera absurdity

and indulging in (as Eszterhas spells it) "Sex-You-All intercourse." One of the most tiresome of the rebels was black and he liked white girls; no wonder the bank president, who was also the fire chief, cried "Yo, a revolution!"



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Eszterhas, a reporter for Rolling Stone, talked to the grownups while wearing a blazer and club tie, to the kids while wearing jeans and a cowhide jacket. The grownups come out as badly as you'd expect ("The ham in his jowls quivered like jello"), but the hairy rebels fare little better. They couldn't condemn Charlie Simpson's triple murder or his suicide—"Like it was a far-out thing to do"—and they had been reading Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin's meretricious books as if they were blueprints for a genuine insurrection. Charlie himself emerges as a demented dreamer who tortured ants and shot up telephones before he shot up people.

There is no glory here, no accomplishment at all. The point about Charlie is that he was a deranged and desperate kid who by accident became the incarnation of the fears of a pathologically narrow-minded community. Eszterhas perceives this, but being addicted to the snarling adjectives, the sentimentality and quaint cuteness that plague the writing of the lesser New Journalists, he treats the comic-opera absurdity of his story as if it were a comic-opera absurdity, thereby abandoning the distance, the perspective, the double vision that would have lent significance to his material. There is too much hype in Eszterhas's story. To report how people talk—ungrammatically and with colored diction—can be effective, even moving, but to adopt self-consciously those same speech patterns for one's own narrative is to vulgarize that narrative—beyond repair.

—PETER S. PRESCOTT

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