ESZTERHÁS, JOE 1974

Rebel Without a Cause

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

By TOBY THOMPSON

ON APRIL 21, 1972, Charlie Simpson, a "ragtag plowboy hippy" with shoulder-length gunmetal-black hair, drove into the town square of Harrisonville, Missouri (pop: 4700), and shot six people—two police officers, the town sheriff, a dry-cleaning man and two bank tellers. Then Charlie Simpson paused in front of the Harrisonville Retirement Home, put the barrel of his M-1 carbine in his mouth, sucked it like a popsicle, and blew a grapefruit-sized hole in the top of his head.

Four people lay dead, three wounded. How come? Using complex techniques of 19th-century naturalistic fiction (more here of Crane and Norris than Capote and Sanders), Joe Eszterhas, a senior editor at Rolling Stone, paints Harrisonville in broad strokes: tornadoes are uncontrolled demons of the American spirit; prairie fires, a godless burning to at once calcify and obliterate the American past; historic neighborhood characters, such as John Brown, Billy Quantrill, Cole Younger, the Daltons, Jesse James and

Carry Nation, are terrible archetypes of vengeance in the consciousness of Harrisonville's citizenry. Forty miles south of Kansas City, and a few miles away from the exact demographic center of the United States, Harrisonville, Missouri, seems hardly able to control itself.

Although *Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse* concerns itself largely with the history of 25-year-old Simpson and a handful of his small-town longhair friends—who in the spring and summer of 1972 waged what Eszterhas calls a "cornponed guerrilla war" for the Harrisonville town square—a principal theme of Eszterhas's book is the schizoid effect of a 1960s revolutionary media-blitz on the American small town. In 1972, small-town kids and their parents were still taking seriously media charlatans such as Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, muleskinners to a Woodstock Nation which had foundered in harness with the Cambodian invasion of 1970: "Charlie was shaping a crude and jumbled socio-political philosophy . . . He viewed himself as an innocent persecuted by 'pigs' and lipsynched those bloodshot burlesque phrases: 'Off the pig!' and 'Up against the wall . . .' He was taking Rubin and Hoffman literally . . . not comprehending that much of his generation had by then dismissed Jerry and Abbie as clowns . . . countercultural gagsters who deadpanned naive believers into jails and Inner Turmoil . . . while they romped on the NBC Nightly News."

TOBY THOMPSON, the author of *Positively Main Street—An Unorthodox View of Bob Dylan*, is currently writing and researching a book about old saloons in America.

"The Revolution" almost happens to Harrisonville. Vigilante groups are formed (a memorable portrait of Colonel John Leach, head of Harrisonville's vigilantes), longhairs refuse to vacate the town square where they claim as much right to loaf and lollygag as anyone else. Merchants complain of bad business due to longhairs' antics, foul mouths and fouler physical presence. A "conspiracy trial" is held after Simpson's donnybrook, outside legal aid is called in, and the town is literally up in arms.

Charlie Simpson and his friends are young people with zero sense of personal or cultural identity. The town square—that "chunk out of the past" to which they are attracted by residents of the Harrisonville Retirement Home, "dirty old men who recalled a bygone America patinaed with gunsmoke and romance"—becomes a very real chunk of the future. If they can just . . . hold the square. Adult citizenry is as adamant: "Their historic square was degenerating into a place of profanity, heathenism, and concupiscence."

Charlie Simpson, captain of Harrisonville's longhairs, is a dark, brooding loser—an asthmatic reject who never finished high school, bounced from rooming house to dirt farm as a child, with his crippled father in tow, and never knew a permanent home. Twenty years earlier, when kicks still rode the American highway like tenor solos in the night, he might have been another Neal Cassady. But not in 1972. For unlike Cassady, a man without a past or future, who lived for the ecstatic Now, Charlie Simpson is obsessed with the past. He is as identityless as his friends, yet refuses to see lack-of-identity as virtue: one instant he is Cole Younger, the next Jerry Rubin; then in a final vi-

sion, he is Henry David Thoreau. A Civil Disobedient. Land and the Thoreauvian existence will save Charlie Simpson from himself; but two days before his mad-dog dance, even that dream fails. A farmer refuses to sell Charlie his dream plot, because he doesn't like the length of Charlie's hair. Charlie's lifesavings go down the tube as bail money for his "revolutionary" brothers. And Charlie does his number.

One hesitates to level "major" or important" at the first book of any young author, for such praise is a kiss of death more often than not, to both sales and future service. But Joe Eszterhas, in this beautifully researched, finely wrought, narratively blessed piece of American journalism, leaves one little choice. What Eszterhas has done, quite simply, is to update the best of American small-town literature, challenging and whipping most of Eggleston, Garland, Masters, Anderson and even Sinclair Lewis himself.

Eszterhas pretends to draw no conclusions from Harrisonville's plight—the picture is bleak. He sees smalltown America as a country obsessed with symbols and their preservation/desecration. There are wonderfully lyrical scenes in *Apocalypse:* of Charlie Simpson gunning telephones on an Indian burial mound; of Charlie and his friends swilling beer at Cole Younger's gravesite; of Charlie shooting up an "Invest in America, Buy U.S. Savings Bonds" sign on the rear wall of Harrisonville's bank. Prairie life in small-town America is as devastating today as it ever was. The prairie is nomad country, a wanderer's land. Interstate highways and hugé impersonal shopping centers lace it now. Perhaps the small town there was never meant to work. □