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## A CHILD'S NIGHT DREAM

By Oliver Stone

St. Martin's; 237 pp.

Three decades into a film career filled with acclaim and controversy, Oliver Stone now offers no ordinary debut novel. Nor does he offer a particularly good one. Rather, it is a frantic document that fills in gaps of the puzzle forming Stone's uncommonly fertile creative mind.

Begun as a stream-of-consciousness self-exploration in Mexico in 1966, finished in New York in 1967, unanimously rejected by publishers, whole sections tossed into the East River in despair, this memoir in novel's clothing centers around Stone's anguish at realizing "although I grew up a child of privilege, without brothers or sisters to share what was mine, and enjoyed many good and happy times, there was, after my parents' sudden separation in 1962, the darkening sense that there was no security in the world."

But that's not a suspicion that suddenly materializes at age 16. Our sense of whether or not our world offers security is formed long before. His flailing resentment toward his parents simply provides Stone's immediate motive for pursuing far-off adventure.

In this hallucinatory tale of a young man dropping out of Yale to go to Vietnam, return by merchant vessel, plunge headlong into the literary and venereal arts and write his story in Mexico becomes a "child's" night dream (in some ways anticipating his 1974 film *Seizure*), Stone simply reiterates toward his parents a bitterness that even he feels vastly overblown.

Overblown is the dominant feeling about everything in this book: its incestuous fascination and repulsion toward his mother, its constant genital fixations, and especially its language.

Burdened by simultaneous delusions of James Joyce and Henry Miller, the young Stone is obtrusively erudite, constantly weaving the words of Shakespeare, Eliot, Dante, Keats, Pound, Tennyson, Faulkner, Coleridge and the Old Testament into his thoughts.

There's seldom anything small about those thoughts. The novel begins at a New York party where 17 year-old Oliver feels "paranoid because it is as if the imminence of my greatness were an open secret." He doesn't fit into the cozy world where he finds himself: "Murderer. Dreamer. Intellectual. Like a little gibbon trapped in a tree."

So he lashes out emotionally, and constantly, in a language midway between poetry and babble: "Squeeze me, you fleshridden pythons of eternity. Coils of slime, as the day is long, despair distinguishes itself in extinction." Stone often sounds like Keruoac with a high fever.

When not anguished, the voice can become cotton candy self-amusement, as when his mother introduces him to a woman named Monique: "Yes, Monique meet. It is meet, I meet Monique."

It would be extreme, however, to suggest, as one advance reader already has, that this is inchoate drivel that found publication solely because of its author's celebrity. There's truth in that, but not the whole truth. There are moments when Stone's fustian prose fits the moment beautifully, especially during a firefight scene in Vietnam. There, Stone hits truth as squarely as any writer this side of Tim O'Brien, although he claims the scenes were written before he actually fought in Vietnam.

Writing of battle, Stone fits the word to the action. Unfortunately, he then dilutes the power of those words by employing a similarly intense tone for everything, so that ultimately this book doesn't bring chills, as it could, it just makes you tired.

But it would make any 50 year-old tired to relive his late teens, as Stone does here, those years when even our metaphors reek of excess: "I yawned once and slipped deeply soundlessly into the black bridal gown of sleep," even outright silliness: "If she had been the sun itself I think I would have embraced it as well and pressed the boiling liquid down the yellow brick road into my walled world of dadaist desire and muted enchantment." Yet, in this protracted song of himself Stone plants several keen needles of perception in his haystack of bombast.

Toward the end, Stone shouts "My novel is sick! My novel is sick!" another truth that is not the whole truth. For there is a precocious if wild and whirling artistic brilliance trying to break through the verbiage here, so that it becomes easy to see the talent that would soon ripen to give us some of the more important films of our age.