

San Francisco Chronicle April, 1997

## TIME ON MY HANDS

By Peter Delacorte

Scribner; 416 pp; \$23

This is no book for Republicans. But Peter Delacorte's affable third novel provides a delightful read for the rest of us.

Travel writer Gabriel Prince confesses that "as a child I had a very clear sense that I was determined to do something exceptional," but as the novel opens in Paris in 1994 his prospects look dim. He's 42, penning books the world will little note, and seeing a woman as duplicitous as Lady Macbeth.

So when colorful 72 year-old physicist Jasper Hudnut approaches Prince and learns his politics are staunchly liberal Democrat, Hudnut finds a discouraged man ripe for a strange story and stranger task.

Hudnut shows Prince a fortuitously discovered time machine from the 22nd Century and asks, "If you could use the machine to go back--say to the beginning of this century--and make any reasonable change, anything that would alter the course of the century, what would you do?"

Possibilities leap to Prince's mind: exterminate Hitler, crush Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Charles Manson, Lawrence Welk, Oliver Stone.

But Hudnut has a different target in mind: Ronald Reagan. Who, inquires Hudnut, generated "all that vulgarity, all that hypocrisy, all that banality, that occurred between 1980 and 1988?"

Reagan's friends, says Prince.

"Do you suppose, Gabriel, that if Reagan never existed . . . all those plutocratic sociopaths could ever find a replacement?"

No, Prince realizes, they couldn't. No one else had "that terrible combination of attributes": just smart enough to seem to have substance when he actually had none, good-looking, likable, telegenic. "The crucial element was that he didn't *know* he was doing evil things.... He did, essentially, just what he was told."

And there it is. Prince's mission, should he decide to accept it: zip back a half century and alter the course of Reagan's life: see to it he doesn't languish as a mediocre actor, marry Nancy Davis and "espouse her family's rather extreme right-wing views." With a simple historical Heimlich maneuver, he can stop it all: the incompetents nominated to the Supreme Court, soaring national debt, Ed Meese, the welfare Cadillac anecdote, the S&L fiasco, Reagan's becoming "the most powerful man in the world, and

he didn't know the difference between Grover Cleveland and Grover Cleveland Alexander."

Equipped with 1930s clothes, buffalo nickels and a laptop containing FDR-era racing results and stock prices, Prince climbs onto the time machine and presses "Go."

Waiting in the family's Malibu mansion in 1938 is Hudnut's cousin, Lorna Fairchild, a young, freespirited actress originally destined for imminent death in the Great Storm of 1938.

Peering into eyes so lovely they shouldn't be opened without parental supervision, Prince is instantly smitten. And after a quick trip to Santa Anita he's also abundantly wealthy. Prince saves Lorna from her early death, preserving both his love and his key to meeting Reagan, as the upwardly mobile starlet works for Warner Bros., whose stable includes the young, talentless "Dutch" Reagan (then pronounced "Ree-gan).

So the Prince not formerly known as an artist tells Lorna he writes screenplays, and she gets him hired at Warner's. It's easy seeming brilliant when you possess a trickle-down memory of the great films of the future. He proposes a western: a sheriff about to marry and leave town with his pacifist wife when he learns a gunslinger he'd sent to prison has been released and is headed back for revenge. In the wings is another script bearing an astounding similarity to *On the Waterfront*. Warner's loves them: "This could put you in Odets territory," they gush.

What Prince isn't prepared for is how endearing he finds the liberal, pre-Nancy Davis Dutch Reagan. Even Lorna thinks Reagan "a very sweet guy, but sort of boring and ... unsophisticated." Her snobbish ex-boyfriend thinks Reagan a Communist.

While no Communist--his mind insufficiently cerebral to entertain that much theory--the young Reagan is good-natured and as optimistic about his career as a poet with a beeper. Prince decides the way to rescue the century is to write a film for Reagan that will establish him as a major star.

But the course of reshaping history never does run smooth. Reagan makes a heroic but possibly fatal decision just as two sleazeballs you wouldn't want anywhere near your neighborhood pop in from the 22nd Century to demand their time machine. From there, until the genuinely poignant ending, things get a tad baroque as Prince tries to stay ahead of the thugs, preserve Lorna from other fated demises, keep Reagan on a benign course and not get lost at the intersection of now and then.

Because of the idea's allure, time travel novels are as common as blue blazers and khaki pants. But the best of them prove extraordinary fun, and Delacorte's is the best I've read since Darryl Brock's 1990 *If I Never Get Back*, and for much the same reasons. They possess not only what we demand of all fine popular novels--absorbing characters, inventive plot and lively prose--but, like all good fantasy, the capacity to immerse us

convincingly in an exotic world. The more fantastic its setting, the more specific and realistic must be the novel's details.

Delacorte saturates his story in a wealth of period detail. Prince notes that olive oil isn't on many grocery shelves yet and people consider beef an exceptionally healthy dish. He eats with Leo Gorcey and collaborates with Howard Hawks. He chats with a modest, perpetually typecast Bogart and producer Hal Wallis (who four years later gave Bogart the lead in *Casablanca* originally announced as Reagan's). He catches Seabiscuit at Santa Anita. When he tells Lorna he'd "broken up" with someone, she corrects him: "broken off." Middlebrow Reagan praises the commissary's spaghetti as "the cat's pajamas." In the background, more ominous period details include Franco, Goring and Mussolini. Delacorte even sprinkles photographs of the novel's people and places throughout the text and concludes with epilogue "evidence" that these events possibly took place, just as Edgar Rice Burroughs began *Tarzan of the Apes*.

So zesty is this stew of incident, character and history that, on further reflection, even Republicans may find themselves entranced.