

San Francisco Chronicle Dec. 1997

STARTING OUT IN THE EVENING

By Brian Morton

Crown; 348 pp.

Author Leonard Schiller, the 71 year-old protagonist of Brian Morton's deeply moving second novel, seems as out of date as a fedora.

That Schiller's four novels are long out of print and no one at his publishing house recognizes his name cannot deter him from his steadfast goal: "He wanted to focus all the life-force he had left" on his final novel. Dangerously obese, his heart barely functioning, Schiller has little remaining life-force to bring to the project.

Then 24 year-old graduate student Heather Wolfe enters his life. He'd been "the man of her dreams." When she'd read Schiller's first two novels in high school, "it was as if he poured his soul directly into hers, and they mixed." Now she wants to do for him what Malcolm Cowley had done 50 years earlier for Faulkner, reintroduce him, via her masters thesis, to a reading public she feels should celebrate his genius.

Schiller balks. The sand has almost all reached the bottom half of his glass. He can't afford the distraction. But she's an intriguing young woman. "Maybe," she'd told the halting widower, "you'll even fall in love with me."

There's another woman in Schiller's life, his daughter, Ariel. At 39, single, childless, a failed dancer, the fragile Ariel nears middle age with a ticking body clock no less frighteningly loud for being cliched. She approaches dating with a combination of desperation and distrust, seeing a bland lawyer simply because "he was the first guy she'd met in a while who wasn't disgusting."

Next to his Oprah-watching, non-reading daughter, Schiller finds Heather beguiling, exhilarating: "This emissary from the future felt strongly about his work.... She might carry him into the future,... keep him alive." He allows her to visit. And he allows her to spend a night in his bed, a night that does more for her than for him: "She was intoxicated with a sense of her own generosity. She felt like a Florence Nightingale of sexual life."

Interweaving the viewpoints of Schiller, Heather and Ariel—later adding that of an attractive love interest of Ariel's—Morton creates an astute, large-hearted examination of crucial concerns at different stages of life.

Heather is starting out. Her attraction to Schiller's first two books, written when he was young, arose from their sense that life was to be lived with self-interested passion. They appealed to the attractive young woman who "felt that life was scandalously easy. If you know what you want, you can get it."

Ariel, whose motto for living had become "Go with the skid" but who grows steadily more appealing as the novel unfolds, knows that point where time becomes measurable. She craves a partner whose passion for life she can admire and a child to love while that is still possible.

Schiller personifies our need to achieve something of note, and recognition, before we're gone, to leave a testament that we've been here. His prime had come during that post-WWII era when America most believed in itself, when young New York intellectuals like himself debated over lunch with Irving Howe the ideas and writers of their time. The great critics of his age, he believes, were unlike those of the current academy; "they weren't theorists, they were *readers*. When Heather asks him, "Do you ever wonder whether people will still be reading *you* in a hundred years?" he answers, "What I wonder is whether people will still be reading in a hundred years."

Consistently erudite, rich in allusions from Terence to Shelley, Morton uses his characters to voice literary judgments that seem his own: "[Mailer's] writing seemed both too literary and too crude, a weird combination of filigree and sweat." He even takes a poke at the magazine for which he is executive editor: "*Dissent* was stifled by its own sobriety: always intelligent, never exciting, it was a finger-wagging grandfather of the left."

This lucently written novel never sinks under the weight of its own probing ideas, for Morton stays rooted in the humanity of his characters and their diverse quests, whose success he in part withholds. That feels less frustrating than appropriate, as if to say, "Despite our dreams unfulfilled, our consolations may turn out to be enough."

They'd have to, wouldn't they?

Barely begun, 1998 has already produced what will surely be among its most stirring novels.